

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Matthew 2:1-12

Johnny looked out through the window of his prison cell. Anger and hatred loomed in his thoughts. Nothing ever seemed to go right in his life. All that he had ever really wanted was acceptance and love; but everywhere he looked for it, he ran into a wall of indifference.

Even his parents turned their backs on him. His life with them was filled with abuse and drugs. In fact, his father introduced him to drugs when he was merely a child, eight years old. By the time he was fourteen, he was living on the streets because his parents kicked him out of the house. His search for love and acceptance eventually led him down the road of drugs, alcohol, and crime.

Sometimes, for brief periods, he left the street life and lived with his grandparents. They gave him a place to live and a job. They took him to church where he found people he could trust and find friendship. But he always returned to the old and never-ending search to find something that was missing deep inside of him. He looked in all the wrong places for fulfillment of this need.

Finally, one day he hit rock bottom. Someone he cared about left him and he could no longer control the pain and anger he felt inside. Driven by rage, he lashed out violently at an innocent little girl who crossed his path as he was walking in a cemetery. He held her captive with a knife and began undressing her. The terrified little girl cried and wanted desperately to scream.

Johnny was oblivious to her terror. All that he could hear were the screams from within himself. He was exhausted and tired of rejection. The screams within him grew louder and louder until, suddenly, someone grabbed him, and he found himself face to face with a policeman.

Johnny's search for love and acceptance led him to a prison cell. There he was left to feed his pain with more hatred and anger. Every morning, he awakened to a new day and thought to himself, "Just a few more years of this dump and then I'll be free again."

Free to do what? To continue the meaningless search? An obvious question we might ask is why didn't Johnny's search end when he was with his grandparents and the people at their church? What they offered him was exactly what he needed. But, you see, the problem was that Johnny was the one on the search and only he could choose for himself that which would end his search.

This is a true story. I knew this young man. Johnny's story may be a bit dramatic compared to most, if not all, of our life stories, but there is something we all have in common with him. We all have those things that we need, but we are not always sure where or what to look for to satisfy our need. And, if we are not careful, the feelings and desires we have surrounding our need can gain control of us and cause us to do some foolish things. The bible tells us that our search for answers and fulfillment can be satisfied by Jesus.

Today's scripture is the familiar story of the three wise men. Inspired by the citing of a brilliant star, they embarked on a search of their own. But before we take a closer look at their journey, I would like us to focus on the other characters in the story and see what we can learn from them.

While on their journey, the wise men made a stop in Jerusalem and looked up King Herod to ask him if he might know where to find the baby born to be the king of the Jews.

Herod was the ruler of Palestine for Rome. He was the builder of the temple in Jerusalem, which was merely his way of bribing the Jews to obedience under his rule. He was a man driven by greed, suspicion, and jealousy. The people feared him because he killed anyone he suspected of trying to steal his power. It is believed that he murdered his wife and three of his sons. He was a man imprisoned with hatred and hostility because of his inability to openly admit and deal with his problem of insecurity.

So, when the wise men asked him about a new king, well, as you can imagine, his blood pressure and his insecurity rose. He called together his chief priests and scribes and asked them where the scriptures say the child would be born. They told him, because the prophet Micah foretold it, the baby was to be born in Bethlehem. Herod wanted to destroy baby Jesus, so he asked the kings to stop upon their return to their homeland to tell him where they found the baby so that he could go and worship him too. The wise men did not stop on their return. In fact, they went home another way because they had been warned about Herod's plan in a dream.

What a miserable and angry man Herod must have been! Driven by insecurity and jealousy, he hurt others, pushed people away, made terrible decisions, and never felt fulfillment in life. We don't know why he was like this, what may have happened in his past to make him so angry and insecure; but we do know he sought for answers to satisfy these personal needs in all the wrong places.

Like Herod, there are people today overwhelmed with feelings of insecurity and jealousy. Grief, anger, greed, a whole host of negative emotions that can inhibit one's ability to feel complete, satisfied, fulfilled in life. Relying on one's self to find the answers that will satisfy their inner pain and longing by such things as turning to material prosperity, or lashing out and hurting others with words or physical harm—these all can lead to further deeper, darker pain.

Next, we read about the chief priests and scribes. These men were experts on the scriptures and the laws. When Herod came to them asking for the whereabouts of Jesus, they knew that the scriptures said he would be born in Bethlehem. The priests and scribes were proud men and liked to show off their knowledge, especially, in this case, to Herod. They knew that if they could please Herod, life would be good for them. They were quick to ridicule and condemn those who criticized them and those who broke the laws as they interpreted the laws. They were men driven by selfishness and pride.

Like the scribes and priests, there are people today who think quite highly of themselves. Pride keeps them from noticing the needs of others. Selfishness blinds them to the possible consequences that others may endure because of their own need to please their peers or those they worship as idols. Our lives do not need to be slaves to these kinds of negative feelings and attitudes and the behaviors that express them.

That brings us to the wise men. Who were they? Originally they were thought to be of the priestly caste among the Persians and Babylonians. Later the Greeks used the same words to identify them as sorcerers and charlatans (or con artists). Matthew uses the term wise men in a positive sense to designate them as honorable men from an Eastern religion. They seemed to have had contacts with Jewish exiles or knowledge of the prophecies of Daniel which made them aware of the prophesy of a coming Messiah.

They were men who watched the stars and believed that the stars could foretell the future; they believed that a man's destiny was settled by the star that he was born under. The stars had an order and this bright star they saw in the east broke that order, signifying to them that something special was happening. The wise men believed the star was a birth announcement. They were curious. They may not have known it when they first saw it, but it was an invitation

from God to meet the Savior of the world, and that's how their journey towards something wonderful began.

The wise men accepted God's invitation. They followed the star and searched for the child born under that bright star. They traveled a great distance and a long time, over perilous territory, but they didn't care—they were driven by their curiosity and their deep desire to meet this special little one. It's interesting that they were willing to travel so far and yet their own kinsmen would not even cross the street to welcome him. Their journey was not in vain. God was with them.

They brought gifts—the best gifts they could offer. Gold, a gift fit for a king—Jesus the King who would rule by love through people's hearts and not from a throne, but from a cross. Frankincense, a gift for a priest, one who is a bridge between man and God. Jesus does that. He opened the way to God. And myrrh, a gift for one who is to die. It was used to embalm the bodies of the dead. Jesus would die for all of us. These were gifts they could not have known were symbolic of and relevant to Jesus' life as the fulfillment of God's promised Messiah. I don't imagine the lives of these wise men were ever the same again. They were Gentiles who came to pay homage to the King of the Jews, and they left taking Him with them in their hearts. Something happened to them, the Spirit moved in them, and it all began because their curiosity led them on a journey to search for something bigger than and greater than themselves.

God sends an invitation to all his children—you, and me—and the lost, the broken, the powerful, insecure, and selfish people of this world. He knows our sin, he knows our needs, and those things we seek to satisfy our needs—emptiness, and longings—and still he offers the invitation to make the journey, to seek out Jesus, to offer him the greatest gift of all, our selves, and to be changed, fulfilled, at peace, and free from that which keeps us from being all that he created us to be—spiritually mature children of God. Amen.