

SEEKING THE LIGHT LIKE THE WISE MEN

Sermon by Rev. Ron Farr

Based on Isaiah 60:1-6 and Matthew 2:1-12
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We so often live in a world of shadows and fears and struggles. Just getting through the day is often a battle. We struggle with others, we struggle with our children, or wives or husbands or partners. We struggle with our selves - our moods, our feelings, our restlessness and depression.

We struggle with how broken and brutal the world is that we live in. And through the muddle of all that struggle and confusion and emotion, we are left with the distinct feeling that there must be something better that we are missing - something deeper, some benevolence or love or eternal dimension that is untouched by the scars of normal human living. That is what propels us to become seekers. We seek these deeper things of God – we hunger for them.

Jesus knows that you and I are seekers. Jesus says, “*Seek, and you will find. Knock, and it will be opened to you.*” That was Jesus’ way of saying, “*You are a seeker seeking the light. So don’t give up – you are going to get where God wants you to be, you are going to feel the way God intended you to feel.*”

So we are seekers, and that is why we have come to church this morning – we are seeking that ineffable and glorious light of God. Most of the time we don’t even know how to describe what we are seeking. Sometimes we say we are seeking peace of mind, a sense of relaxed well-being flowing through all the hurts and tensions of life. Sometimes we say that what is missing in our lives is an elusive happiness or joy for which we are ever hunting. At other times we say that we are longing to be close to God and God’s love, that we are feeling so alone because somehow we cannot quite connect with the deep origin of our lives which we call God, the most holy One.

Hafiz, the Sufi poet writes, “*I long for You so much (O Lord). I follow barefoot Your frozen tracks that are high in the mountains that I know are years old. I long for You so much I have even begun to travel where I have never been before. There is no one in this world who is not looking for God. Everyone is trudging along with as much dignity, courage, and style as they possibly can*” (*The Subject Tonight is Love*, D. Ladinsky, p. 57). Our longing for God,

for God's comfort, for life's most noble truths, is so strong sometimes that we would be willing to walk barefoot in the snow for miles tracking God's faint and fading footprints.

The gospel of Matthew refers to wise men who came from the east seeking the Christ child. The text says, *"In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.'"*

The wise men were seekers, just like you and me. They would have walked hundreds of miles barefoot if need be to find this child of God. They were hungering for something that was missing within them, some deep truth, some hidden beauty that God was about to raise up, some sense of rightness that would heal all the world's injustices, some elusive joy that their souls and all humanity hungers for. These wise men were seekers of these deeper things – and their searching was their pre-eminent purpose in life.

The scriptures point out that these wise men were willing to take a very long journey for the legendary child they were seeking – they came from the East the text says, maybe from Persia. They were willing to take a costly journey with no map, no guarantee they would find what they were looking for, and very little to go on in terms of directions outside a faint star on the horizon. They just relied on their basic instincts and intuitions as they humbly asked people in each town they traveled through for directions and clues.

Are you searching that hard for God's light, and for God's true ways of life? Are you willing to take a long and risky journey that requires much self-sacrifice and much compassionate living so that you might know God, know love, know the ways of Christ? Are you willing to humbly journey with others at Emmanuel through countless worship services, meditation and prayer times, spiritual growth classes and Bible studies and retreats in your search for God's light? Are you willing to journey through difficulties and conflicts and moral dilemmas to reach and bask in God's beautiful light?

How much is this seeking for God's light and love your purpose in life? I see so many people who are seekers, who suddenly light up with a sudden flash of interest in God, in their spiritual quest, in the peace of Christ that holds together all opposites and reconciles all opponents. But then, that flash of interest dries up as quickly as it came, and those beautiful would-be-seekers disappear back into their own shadows and fears. Is that happening to you? Are you a seeker who sometimes loses your way?

The wise men never gave up seeking for the Christ child. They pressed on, they persisted in their seeking, following a faint star, night after night. They even dared to speak to a threatening King Herod in Jerusalem, and they risked their lives by disobeying his orders to report back to him. They boldly left no stone unturned. They never lost their way or their resolve. Are you like that in your journey toward God's truth and light? Or do you sometimes forget the importance of your spiritual quest to Christ, and get distracted by your emotions, or your fears, or your busyness?

Each day we take a journey toward God's light. Each day we set out hopefully like the wise men, but our inspiration often dries up so quickly. There are so many days that we never make it to the Christ child, we never make it to our origin of light, we never make it to God's peace, we never make it to the noble life that is lived in harmony with Christ. Instead, we take wrong paths, we get lost in the shadows of bad attitudes, emotional outbursts, and the shimmerings of false values and inner demons that whisper promising but misguided directions into our ears. We are like wise men and women who get lost out in the desert, or waylaid in the wrong city, or caught up in another universe of ignorant and superficial living.

This year we all need to become more steady and focused in our seeking of God's light. To be a steady seeker requires a number of things. We can learn these things from the wise men. What motivated them? What kept them on track? What made them so steady? What kept them going each day before they found the child, and then how did they follow the light after they gave their gifts and departed?

The first thing we can see is that the wise men were awake enough to see the light – they saw that faint morning star in the Eastern sky, and they saw its promise and power, and they believed in it. They believed in it enough to pursue it everyday like a hungry person pursuing food. Is that what you do everyday?

Do you see God's light and promise breaking out of all your different experiences each day? Or when you go through your day, do you usually see only shadows, and disappointments, and hopelessness, because there is so much of that in this world?

The wise men saw light in Christ. They saw God working in Mary and Joseph. Not everybody saw that light. In fact, very few people did. How about you? Do you see that light in Christ? Do you really see it? Or do you just merely believe nice things about Jesus but don't really see his glorious, life-changing light? How compelling do you allow the light of Christ to be? Enough to drop your shadows and your overbooked schedules?

And if you see the light in Jesus, do you see that light at Emmanuel rising up out of the ordinary people you are sitting next to right now, out of the people you rub shoulders with here in worship or in committee meetings where you are trying to creatively deal with problems together? Do you hunt for the light of God trying to emerge out of those places, and do you pursue it when you catch sight of it?

The another thing we can see about the wise men's steady seeking is that their search was a humble one. They were aware that the Christ child might be anywhere, and that his parents could be anybody – even adoptive parents. Their search for the Christ child was not elitist. Yes, they visited Jerusalem, the capital city of the Jews, and looked for the Christ child there among the rich and powerful and educated. But if we also take clues from the gospel of Luke, they must have looked in stable in the little town of Bethlehem among the poor and powerless.

So does your search for Christ light's take you outside of the expected sacred locations such as church or Christian scriptures or religious talk? Do you see Christ's light among

unchurched or “unimportant” people like stable hands or cynics? Do you see Christ’s light in a tree or in a snowflake or in your neighbor’s dog? Do you see Christ’s light in the foreigner, in the foreigner’s religion, in the foreigner’s scriptures? Do you see that light of Christ glowing in the Buddha, or in Gandhi, or in some Zen master? Do you see that light of Christ in poetry, in a book, in a newspaper editorial, or in other unlikely sources of light? Do you see Christ’s light emerging in far distant places – in secular bookstores, coffeeshops, bars, or in songs on the radio? The light of Christ is emerging everywhere, and can be seen by those who are seeking it like the wise men.

The Persian poet Rumi once wrote, *“If God said (to me) ... ‘Pay homage to everything that has helped you enter my arms,’ there would not be one experience of my life, not one thought, not one feeling, not any act, I would not bow to”* (Love Poems from God, D. Ladinsky, p. 68). How can Rumi say that? Because the light of God, for those who are pursuing it, is found everywhere. What Isaiah proclaimed applies to every moment, *“Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you... you shall see and be radiant.”*

The wise men eventually found the Christ child in Bethlehem. The scripture says, *“On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.”*

The wise men did not stay too long. Their arduous trip found it’s completion in a momentary bow and giving of a gift. That’s it. But it was a cosmically important act because the wise men, like Rumi, were paying homage to what was helping them and all humanity be healed and radiant. The wise men had traveled all that distance, through all that uncertainty, to celebrate the light of God and bask in it.

This is the secret of the seeker’s life: ever to pursue and catch sight of God’s light, and then to make one’s mental home in the warmth of that light, regardless of the darkness and struggle that swirls around you. The poet Hafiz writes, *“Like two lovers who have become lost in a winter blizzard and find a cozy, empty hut in the forest, I now huddle everywhere with the Friend - God, and I, have built an immense fire together. We keep each other happy and warm”* (The Subject Tonight is Love, D. Ladinsky, p. 10).

When you see a glimmer of that light of Christ from whatever source, do you make it your business to honor it? Do you light a candle to it, do you get down on your knees and bow to it, do you make your home in it? That is what we must do every minute of every day - see the light, believe in the light, pursue the light, celebrate the light, make our home in the light. That light is a warm and healing fire that you and God always privately share, as in a cozy hut in the forest in the heart of a blizzard. This is where your seeking takes you. As disciples of Christ, this is our center. And if it’s not yet your center, you should make it your center.

Jesus said, *“Seek, and you will find. Knock, and it will be opened to you.”* That was Jesus’ way of saying, *“You are a seeker, seeking my light. So never give up – you are*

going to get where God wants you to be, you are going to feel the way God intended you to feel.”

Think about what you want to do next. The light is out there, emerging from every experience of every day. Don't lose your way. Grow stronger this year in your seeking. Seek Christ, and live in the light that has come.

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