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From Generation to Generation:

We Keep Seeking

Matthew 2:1-12

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If you're like hundreds of thousands, maybe millions of others, you've got "The List" of things you're seeking to change, accomplish, slow down, speed up, stop, or start doing in the new year. We call them resolutions. I was doing some reading about this annual practice and came across some familiar data about the success and failure rates of making resolutions. We know how this goes; this isn't new news, it's just updated for 2023. Here's how the trend goes for the next six months. Of those who make a New Year's resolution, 75% will still be successful in keeping it after one week. After two weeks, by the 15th of January, the number will drop to 71%. By the end of January, the number drops again to 64%. And by the time we get to the 4th of July, just under half - 46% of people who make resolutions will still be successful in keeping them. It turns out that seeking a better lifestyle is a big challenge every year.

So, here's the million dollar question: why do people keep making long lists of New Year's resolutions? Well, it turns out there's some important psychology to it. Making resolutions offers us a blank slate. We get a do-over. It creates an opportunity to get things right. Making New Year's resolutions increases our motivation, keeps us accountable, and serves as a reminder of our commitments, all of which increase our chances of accomplishing them – at least for a short time. So, we give it another whirl this year. I have to say, one of the more creative, if not entertaining, New Year's resolutions I ran across was this one: "My goal for 2023 is to accomplish the goals I set for 2022, which I should have accomplished in 2021 because I promised them in 2020 after planning them in 2019." Wow. That's honest. I completely resonate with that. I could have written that one. Several years ago, I decided to stop the New Year's resolution madness. Instead of creating long lists of resolutions and goals that I knew, even as I wrote them down, I'd abandon within weeks, I invested some energy in a different direction. Turns out,

that was a wise choice. I committed to focusing on just one word that would serve as my inspiration, my guiding star for the year ahead. Here's how that worked: In 2019, my one word for the year was "Dwelling."

On most days I focused on dwelling in the moment, being fully present right here and right now, wherever here and now was. I wrote "dwelling" on little sticky notes and put them where I'd see them often. And then, every day, I focused on being more fully present to the people I encountered and the things I was doing. I was dwelling.

My word for the year 2020 was "Clarity." You might recall that 2020 was a bit of a blur. But I wanted to bring some intentional focus each day to my life, relationships, work, creativity, music, writing, and life as a follower of Jesus. Being reminded to seek some "clarity" every day helped me navigate the year that was 2020.

Last year, my word was "Thrive." With all of the changes and transitions, focusing on ways of thriving in the midst of all that was going on was enormously helpful.

I've been thinking about my one-word for 2023. And one of the best words to make the shortlist for me this year is "Seeking." As in seeking Jesus. Seeking his wisdom in everything I do. Seeking his way of compassion, love, patience, serving, seeking his way of life. Think about how impacting it could be to go into the next 365 days asking questions and being curious about how seeking the Jesus Way each day could shape the way we interact with others – family, friends, the barista, a server in a restaurant, another driver, people we know, people we don't know. There's some wisdom in all of that!

This weekend, we're concluding our series, "From Generation to Generation." For the last six weeks, we've been learning how our lives, histories, actions, and stories are interconnected and woven. One of the guiding passages comes from Luke's Gospel (1:48-50), where Mary, when she discovers that she is pregnant with Jesus, comes to this conclusion: "Surely, from now on, all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is His name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation."

We've looked at several biblical characters and how each one contributed to the next generation and participated in God's movement of liberation and love. We also saw how some characters tried to obstruct God's justice and wondered what we could learn from them. What is our role now? What is our generation's task? What do we need to leave behind, and what will we carry forward?

Today as we conclude our series, we meet the Magi – Wise Men from the East. In the passage from Matthew 2, the wise men are seekers. They are seeking Jesus; they come to worship him. There are several fascinating things about this story, including a paranoid head of state, rumors of a government coup, a clandestine meeting of religious and civic leaders, a city held hostage by fear, an immigrant family with ties to Israel's most famous leaders, a trio of international scholars caught up in a murder plot of biblical proportions, a mysteriously bright star, and the fulfillment of an ancient prophecy that will change everything. But Matthew has more in mind than telling a riveting story about an impromptu baby shower complete with what seems like impractical gifts. What's fascinating is that Matthew carefully, intentionally describes who these Wise Men are seeking in a way that compels us to ask, who are we seeking? Who is this child, this king, this Shepherd, this ruler and Messiah? It's all here in Matthew 2:1-12.

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." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'" Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I

may also go and pay him homage." When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 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."

For many of us, the Wise Men have been part of the original story from the beginning. The historical chronology of the birth story of Jesus gets a little fuzzy around the edges. Who was there, where they came from, how many were part of the entourage, when they actually arrived, and how long they stayed are all good questions for another conversation. But imagine the nativity scene displayed on your neighbor's lawn, at a big box hardware store, or even under your own Christmas tree at home. There's a good chance that three bearded dudes wearing crowns, flowing robes, and flanked by camels. They're most likely positioned near the entrance, just outside, peering into the already crowded stable, bringing what seems like wildly impractical gifts for a baby: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. It is, by now, a tired, overused attempt at humor that if they had been three wise women who had brought gifts to the baby Jesus, they would have brought diapers, blankets, and food. Yup, I get it.

But Matthew had a different purpose. Matthew wanted people to know that these wise men were seeking not just another baby in a cattle feeder in a stable because there was no room for him in the inn. Matthew wanted people who heard and read this story from generation to generation to think about gold as a symbol of kingship on earth, frankincense as a symbol of deity, and myrrh, an embalming oil, as a symbol of death and who it is that would be worthy of those gifts. So, Matthew places the Wise Men in the story to spark curiosity about who they are seeking. And their seeking brought them to Jesus. And their story sets up the ultimate question for anyone who has ever wondered, who is this child? The story of the Magi

– the Wise Men ultimately challenges us to keep seeking Jesus, who is Child, Shepherd, and Messiah.

Let me break that down for us. First, Matthew wants us to keep seeking Jesus, the child. And so, we come as children seeking Jesus, the child. There is something very powerful about looking into the face of an infant. When we look into a small child's face, there is always wonder, curiosity, connection, and affection. For the past eight months, we have been getting to know Wilson Kalsow. And Wilson has been getting to know us. Now, we certainly do love Amy and Wally. But it's safe to say that we really love Wilson. I've often slowly walked up to his car seat and peered into his sweet face. It's been easy to feel nearly overwhelmed with the sheer wonder of his new life. Safe to say, Wilson probably wonders about all the faces that frequently appear mere inches from his own. Over time, however, the wonder and curiosity we've experienced in those moments have grown into a connection that has created some affection. Every metaphor breaks down at some point, but as we keep seeking Jesus together in this place – as we continue to look into the face of the Christ-Child, Jesus, we grow in our wonder, curiosity, connection, and affection to Jesus. How would you lean into that if your word for the coming year was "seeking"? How would you grow in your wonder and curiosity about Jesus? How would you grow in your connection to and affection for Jesus? You would probably make some commitments to getting to know him even better. You would probably commit to reading scripture with a bit more frequency. You would probably consider coming to the Engage Bible Study on the book of Revelation that begins next week. You would probably want to keep seeking Jesus in the lives of our guests who come to Mission Outpost. You would probably be amazed by how often serving others connects you more deeply to Jesus. These are all ways that we keep seeking the child, Jesus, and growing in our wonder, curiosity, connection, and affection for him.

Second, Matthew wants us to keep seeking Jesus, the Shepherd. And so, we come as sheep seeking the Shepherd. The Magi were seekers; they were naturally curious and wanted to know more. They

were seeking wisdom. But not just any wisdom; they were seeking transcendent truth. They were seeking the Divine. And their seeking brought them to Jesus, the Shepherd. But there's a big twist here. Let me explain. While the role of a shepherd is mostly unfamiliar in our 21st-century context, the implications of Jesus as the Shepherd of our lives are vitally important. A shepherd's role is to guide, guard, and lead the sheep. The Shepherd is deeply committed to the sheep and their wellbeing. In Luke's version of the life of Jesus, there is a parable that Jesus uses to show how extravagant and committed a shepherd is to the sheep. "Which one of you," Jesus asks, "having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When the Shepherd has found the sheep, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls his friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' Have you ever felt lost? Have you ever felt trapped, stuck, backed into a corner, honestly not knowing what your next step or move might be? The promise from scripture is that Jesus, the Good Shepherd, seeks us out; he is the one who comes looking for us. So, sure, the wise men were seeking God, but God surprised them by showing up in the disarming form of a child, a child-like shepherd who guides, guards, protects, gathers, comforts, and loves his flock. We are that flock. It may be that our seeking of Jesus brings us to that moment where we discover that we have already been found by the Shepherd, Jesus, in our moments of feeling great loss.

Third, Matthew wants us to keep seeking Jesus, the Messiah. And so, we come as people seeking a savior because sometimes we need to be rescued, delivered, set free, helped, comforted, and loved; we need to be saved. If I were to ask you today what one word would serve as your inspiration, your guiding star for the year ahead, you might choose "Dwelling." You might write that word on little sticky notes and put them where you will see it often. And then, focus on being more present to the people you are with every day, dwelling more intentionally in what you do each day. You might choose the word "Clarity" because life often seems like a bit of a blur, and you could certainly do with

a little more focus. You might choose the word "Thrive" because you've lost a loved one and are unsure how you will move ahead. You might choose the word "Thrive" because you're coming to that stage of life or are already in it, where it seems like everyone around you is making decisions for you. You might choose the word "Thrive" because you don't want to make a well-intentioned list of changes only to watch them evaporate into the mist of good intentions. The Magi came seeking the Savior. We, too, come seeking a Savior. We come seeking Jesus, the Messiah, the one who rescues us from hopelessness, the one who delivers us from evil, the one who sets us free from the power of addiction, the one who helps us when we can't help ourselves, the one who comforts us in times of raw, grinding grief, the one who loves us when we feel utterly unlovable, the one who saves us for life and more life. These are all ways that we keep seeking the Messiah, Jesus. My one word for 2023 may very well be "Seeking..." as, in seeking Jesus, the child, the Shepherd, the Messiah is the one who is seeking me – seeking us. What is your word? What one word would help you keep seeking Jesus?