

Have you ever had the feeling someone wanted to speak to you or ask you a question but just didn't have the courage to? I knew by his mannerisms that he wanted to talk to me or ask a question. He usually was not shy about talking and asked questions outright! Finally, when we were somewhat alone he asked, "What were you doing at midnight in your front yard last night, wrapped in blankets?" He was a deputy sheriff and had been out on patrol with a new State Trooper showing him the back roads, etc. He had pointed out the parsonage and asked the Trooper to keep an eye on it from time to time—and there we were—four us (another couple was visiting) out in the front yard, looking heavenward! He had had no response when he was asked what we were doing. And, for some reason dared not stop and ask. The answer was simple: we were star or meteorite gazing. It was the annual meteorite shower, it was a clear, cold moonless night and the display was spectacular.

They were star gazers, astronomers; they spent their lives learning about the stars by watching the heavens. They did not have the knowledge of the universe that we do today, or the equipment – they were awed by the brilliance of the night skies. There were nights spent charting the heavens. It is these star gazers who discover a new star, a star with such brilliance that it marks an event that will forever change history—a king is born. There is only one option: go and find this child and present him gifts worthy of a king.

They travel to where they expect a new king to be, the palace of a king. Kings are born in palaces, they have a royal lineage and it is a time of celebration for the whole land when a new king is born. Thus, they go to Herod's household, the palace of the king. However, Herod and his household are shocked to hear the news that a new king has been born, one who is to be King of the Jews. There is no new king in Jerusalem. They have not had any royal births. These men must be wrong. What do the Scriptures say? (At least Herod has sense enough to raise the right questions.) How could a birth such as this escape those in power? Herod is made to look bad in the eyes of these visitors from the East.

After the reports come back, Herod brings the wise men to him and questions them more thoroughly about the time of the appearance of the star, etc. Then he commissions them to continue following the star, and then bring back word to him so that he too may find and worship this new king of the Jews: "*Bring me word that I too may worship him.*" They leave and are delighted to continue following the star to a house in Bethlehem. There they find the child and present to him their gifts.

Now where is Paul Harvey when you need him? I mean, don't you have more questions? I do. What possessed these men to undertake such a dangerous journey? Did they travel by night? After all, it is hard to follow a star by day. Or, did they chart the position of the star and travel to Jerusalem knowing it was the royal city of Israel? Still, any type of travel would be dangerous. They were carrying expensive treasures and would attract attention, visitors from the East. How big was their entourage? And, why do they have such an intense desire to see this child? This

king? Of course, most babies, even newborn kings, are born without the arrival of a new star in the heavens.

What they found was not what they expected. A humble house in Bethlehem, a young mother and a carpenter father are not the images they had planned for. There were no royal trappings, no regal robes, no nursemaids. They had gone to Herod and his palace in Jerusalem expecting it to be the place, it wasn't. Now they are in Bethlehem in a humble home and yet, there is no mistake, this is the child; this is the King of Jews. They somehow knew, and, upon finding the child, they bow down and worship him and present him their kingly gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Guided by a star these star gazers join the shepherds as some of the first people to see and acknowledge that God is here.

In thinking about these verses I have noted that God is often found in unexpected places and in unexpected people. I went back and thumbed through a wonderful book by Michael Elliott, *Playing Hide & Seek: A non-Churchgoers Guide to Finding God*, looking for my highlighted sentences. He writes: "When God attends church, congregations become communities; and because very few congregations remain communities, we know that God rarely attends church." What a powerful and troubling statement. One the church needs to take seriously. He also adds, rather tongue-in-cheek, other places where God is not likely to be found.

- **political conventions or rallies**
- **the White House, Congress, governors' mansions, city halls or other meetings of politicians**
- **most for-profit hospitals**
- **most corporate board offices**
- **welfare offices (although God very often waits outside the door and accompanies people who are leaving)**
- **the pastor's study during sermon preparation**
- **finance committee meetings**
- **seminaries**
- **most places of entertainment**

His insights are often hard for those of us who love the church to read or hear. Yet they contain a certain amount of truth. Often our agendas leave little room for God to burst forth in our midst. You know, *WE HAVE NEVER DONE IT THAT WAY BEFORE!* We have our traditions and our traditions must be kept, regardless of what God wants.

I recall a new member in New Hampshire questioning why we had worship at 9:30 a.m. She liked to sleep in late on Sunday mornings. She liked the church, the people and its close location to where she had moved but she did not like the early time of worship. Why did we worship at 9:30 a.m.? It went back to the time when the congregation shared its pastor with another congregation in town. One got the pastor at 9:30 a.m. and the other at 11:00 a.m. As this was then the smaller congregation, it got the 9:30 a.m. hour. When they had grown and were able to be one their own, they had grown accustomed to the 9:30 time and continued having

their church school after worship. We didn't change the time, she became accustomed to the new time (and grew to like it) and we knew why we worshipped at 9:30 a.m.

So, where does one find God? Continuing with Michael Elliott and his thoughts: He writes that God attends AA meetings, for it is here people are honest and entirely dependent on one another for strength for tomorrow. He also sees God hanging around the poor, the homeless, with widows and orphans: "God is almost always present when the homeless are housed, the hungry are fed, or the sick are cared for; but the ones giving the help are normally too tired to notice, and the ones receiving are too exhausted from asking to realize it." He reminds us: "Remember, God doesn't feel that anyone must be impressed."

Like the wise men, the star gazers, we must be prepared to find God where God is. He does have a list of likely places where God may be found.

- **Wherever children are playing, God is close by**
- **When we pass a hitchhiker on the road, God is close by.**
- **When barriers that separate people are torn down, God is close by.**
- **When someone forgives someone else, God is close by.**
- **When someone cleans up another's mess, God is close by.**
- **God attends all births.**
- **God attends most funerals.**
- **God likes it when people laugh and will almost always stop by to see what is so funny.**
- **God likes it when people share, and always affirms it.**
- **God likes a good story and will usually stop in to listen when a really good one is told.**

We have a friend who issues this challenge to the church today: **To go and find where God is working in the world and go and join God there.** It is past the day when people come to the church and we can no longer expect the world to seek God within the church. God is still working in the world and the church must join God where God is working.

The only ones who saw the star were these star gazers from the East. When they discovered it, there was only one thing they could do – go and find this newborn king. When they found him in the most unlikely of places and circumstances they then did the only thing they could do -- *“On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasurers and present him with gifts of gold, and of incense and myrrh.”*

Can we do any less?

Elliott, Michael, *Playing Hide & Seek*, Peake Road, Macon, Georgia, 1996 (pp 5, 7, 10, & 96)