

The Life-Changing Potential of Curiosity

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”

Matthew 2:1-2

The trip of wise men traveling to Judea to find a boy who had been born there is... well, it's an astonishing story. I think we've heard it so often that we often fail to see how remarkable it is. These Magi were not Jewish men and yet they somehow knew a prophecy about a child who would be born King of the Jews. How did that happen?

One theory is that these men came from the area that is now Yemen. There is evidence that Jewish people lived in Yemen – and had some prominence there. The Magi could have heard about a child who would become king from them. If that's true, then theirs would be a trip of almost 1,400 miles – and that's air miles. To get to Bethlehem from Yemen would have required going through desert and mountain regions. And, there were no planes, no cars, no trains. It would have been a grueling trip.

So, **what could have motivated these Magi to do such an extraordinary thing? I think it might have been simple curiosity.** No doubt, they had heard stories from their Jewish neighbors that had fascinated them. And, they were almost certainly astronomers, having devoted their lives to understanding the stars. Like so many scientists in our church and in our world, although they understood a lot about the universe, I imagine they sensed that there had to be something more than just the empirical world.

So, they saw something in the stars that was not the usual configuration. They only said, “We have seen his star.” From what must have been an exceptional astronomical experience, they were curious enough to leave their comfort zones to pursue what this out of the ordinary occurrence might be about.

More than that, they seemed to be looking for something that nothing in this world or in the stars could satisfy. “We have come to worship,” they said.

I've found that meetings with Jesus often begin like that. There is, at the beginning, nothing more than curiosity. "There's something different about that Christian next door. I must find out what it is." "There has to be more to live for than I've found so far. I think I'll look at it more closely this year."

Here at Lake Avenue Church, we have a lot of people who worship Jesus whose spiritual journeys began with a curiosity that led them to seek the truth. Two of them have told their stories in our services before – but I know many of you who come on Christmas Eve haven't heard them -- so I'll tell them briefly again:

Steve Cunningham

Dr. Steve Cunningham grew up thinking that miracles don't happen. Then, for many years, Steve was educated as a scientist, a physicist and as an engineer. His PhD is in the field of Theoretical Solid State Physics. With PhD in hand, Steve engaged in 6 years of post-doctoral work in related sciences, all confirming his thoroughgoing materialist worldview.

Steve's life continued on without any belief in God until things changed dramatically when his brother invited him to a meeting at a small church in Compton, CA. At that church, Steve saw a blind woman instantly healed in response to a brief prayer, a woman whom he knew had been blind for three years. That left him to be curious about whether his naturalistic worldview was too small to embrace all of reality. After wrestling with how such a healing could happen, Dr. Steve Cunningham became a fully committed Jesus-follower. He still is. In fact, he heads up prayer ministries here at Lake Avenue Church.

Min Li Shigematsu

Li Min was born and raised in China. All religion was strictly forbidden in Chinese society at the time, especially for children. But, Min testifies, “Although I had never heard about God, God began to tug inside of me. All that I was taught left my heart unsettled. I knew something was missing.”

At a young age, Min was curious about “the causation question”. She used to ask her Grandma, “Who is my Grandma's Grandma's Grandma...? Who was the first Grandma?” She had a deep intuition that there has to be some sort of uncaused cause in the universe.

Min also was affected by the reality of death. This became agonizingly personal when both of her grandparents died prematurely during her teenage years. Min wrote me, “I struggled greatly knowing the truth that one day death will take all my loved ones away and it will take my life too. If everything ends in death, does life have ultimate meaning? With that question in my heart and mind, I was very unhappy.”

Both those issues haunted Min into her university years. She asked about them unrelentingly. One day, after she had she had been discussing them with a friend, that friend gave her a book and told her to read it. Min opened it at home and read, “In the beginning, God created...” Min testifies, “The first sentence in the Bible brought my heart home and I felt peace.”

Then, she read the Bible voraciously and learned that her questions about death were also addressed – and that death is not the end of things. Min accepted Jesus into her life. Min, her husband Jon and daughter Faith are now active members here at Lake. In fact, she translated my message tonight into Chinese.

Like the journey of the wise men, Steve and Min’s experiences with God began with curiosity. I think we need more open-minded curiosity in our day than there usually is. Here in Southern CA, our busy schedules often keep us from pursuing the questions we have about the big issues of our existence. Who among us would take the time to journey to Bethlehem? Others are too cynical to investigate what a star like the one the Magi saw might mean. It would have been easy for them to have said, “Miracles, ha! They don’t happen in this world! That out-of-the-ordinary star is interesting, yes – but, it’s not worth my time to investigate.” Many close the door on an encounter with God by not pursuing the questions that are in the hearts of all human beings.

But these Magi still had that healthy inquisitiveness -- though I’m sure they didn’t know exactly where it would lead. And it changed their lives. Look at **Mt 2:11** – “*On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him.*”

They “worshiped him”. That was a word for putting someone at the center of their lives and affections. And, I think it began with curiosity.

I remember the time in my graduate work when I saw Jesus’ words, “I am the truth” in a new way. He meant that when we take the time to honestly seek what is true, ultimately we will come to him. Steve and Min asked the big questions of life:

- Isn’t there more to life than just the material things we see, hear, and touch?
- How did this world begin?
- Is there life after death? Isn’t there more to live for than I’ve experienced so far?

Those questions brought them to Jesus. I pray the same will be true of you – so I leave you with these great verses – as I do each Christmas Eve:

God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

Jesus, John 3:16-17