

Christmas Eve 2008

Matthew 2

The Magi were truth-seekers. Their quest led them hundreds – perhaps thousands – of miles to a small town with a regal history, and to a small baby with humble parents, around a king with raging ill-will, and back home again. What did they do with the truth they discovered?

I'm an avid Jeopardy watcher. It's one of the few shows I actually try to watch with some consistency. And I'm a believer that curiosity is good for both mind and soul, and that the world is a fascinating place to gather data even if it's somewhat inconsequential. And I've seen enough cynicism and felt enough at times to know that a "so what" posture toward the surrounding drama of life is a formula for profound unhappiness.

Still, so much of what we know and learn isn't transformative or life-altering or earthshaking. It might be true, and it might have real significance in some remote life or reality. But honestly, so what?

This story that we tell again tonight in words and songs, and that we dramatize every Christmas morning as we exchange gifts in honor of the Magi, has been so transformative and life-changing and earth-shaking that a "so what" is monumentally ill-informed. At the very least, the birth story of Jesus should inspire a library of historical and sociological studies into how one child born into obscurity in a tiny, subjugated country on the outskirts of a powerful empire twenty centuries ago could still be the best-known figure on the human landscape. His name will be invoked at the inauguration of our next president. Every third song on most radio stations for an entire month describes his moment of arrival and the significance of his life. His birthday will inspire most households to spend beyond their means to shower loved-ones with tangible shows of affection, not because it's their day, but because it's Jesus' day – Christmas, which means "Christ-celebration."

So, "So?" or "So what?" seem like preposterous questions, especially to those who believe the story and believe in the baby. We can even get defensive about the active disinterest of others and the practiced avoidance that we see in the celebration of secondary Christmas characters with their shiny red coats and noses, and their "presents for pretty girls."

Instead of getting ticked, I'd rather see us deal more honestly, with less avoidance, with the *so what* question. Maybe people are really asking. I know what I was really asking the year I caught Mommy kissing Santa Claus. What is this really about? Why do people say it matters so much? Thankfully, instead of rolling their eyes at my insolence, or recoiling at my ignorance, some very kind people invested in my life long enough to make sure that I trusted them, and then carefully explained the answer to *so what*.

From my first aha moment, this story and its implications have revolutionized my life. The truth of this story has inspired and instructed me, corrected and protected me, healed and helped me, confronted and comforted me, humbled and rescued and bettered

me so much and so often that I've realigned life around the desperate hope that other will know *so what*.

So what?

So you can know that you (and we) are not alone in the universe. God loves you so much that he won't force himself on you like a bully. Instead, like a steady stream of poetry, he woos and wows you with the daily wonders of creation; and then he quietly shows up at the back door of the human home. He coos and cries in the vulnerable form of our own infant mortality for the privilege of our affection and the pleasure of authentic companionship.

So what?

So we can know and be known.

So we can know who we are and why we're here.

So what?

So we can live with the hope and purpose and a window into the grandeur all creation, from the infinite universe to the miniscule galaxies spinning and rolling in our own cells and atoms.

So what?

So that we have real help and practical wisdom. So that we can get our heads around *ethos* and *pathos*, and even the humor, of the invisible God.

So what?

So that all of the other truths – from Snapple Cap trivia to the facts and formulas that inform your occupations – can find a place and an order in the grand scheme that gives each of our lives worth and enough momentum to live forward.

So what?

“Long lay the world in sin and error pining, ‘til he appeared and the soul felt its worth ...”

So what?

“So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven.”

So what?

“Mild he lays his glory by; born that man no more may die; born to raise the sons of earth; born to give them second birth.”

Honestly, the so what here is so cataclysmic and so catalytic that all the world and each person who really owns this truth will enjoy so many and such a good blessing and benefits that any effort at cataloguing them would be a bold understatement.

I know that many people, and most people who have come to a service like this when they could be drinking another mug of eggnog, are not necessarily asking *so what* or practicing avoidance or actively disinterested. My bigger concern for the Christmas Eve crowd is that a seasonal and sentimental reverence will not catalyze any real effort the way a steadier and headier effort might. Like a well-intentioned January diet, our seasonal and sentimental Christmas faith can actually leave us more disappointed because we haven't deeply owned the value or deeply grooved the exercises that make a more lasting impression.

This is not the shallow rant of a pastor who laments the Christmas and Easter high tide that gives way to a low summer ebb. This is a simply truth and an honest appeal from someone who feels over-blessed because I once believed in the story enough to let it inform by approach to life year-round. Jesus makes all the difference. Relationship with

him – steady and sure – is the best predictor of your contentment, your sense of security, and even the health of your family relationships that I can possibly imagine. Do it with God and for God, with the active guidance of Jesus’ counsel, and life works. It’s not always easy or pain free, but even our labors and losses will find a resting place on the life-ordering, life breathing path of Christ.

So?

So everything. Everything matters. Everything that really feeds us and grows us and applies our lives with purpose.

So what?

So ...

“Sages, leave your contemplations,
Brighter visions beam afar;
Seek the great Desire of nations
Ye have seen his natal star.
Come and worship.
Come and worship.
Worship Christ the Newborn King.”