

121524The Mystery of Life – and how to solve it

1. Warm up: What are you most looking forward to this Christmas?
2. Sunday's sermon began with a brief word from our sponsor, Pastor Luther Trustworthy, the leader of "The Answer To Everything Ministries." Pastor Trustworthy was attempting to sell us 'God in a box.' ☺ When in your life have you faced a situation or theological question where you realized you had to break out of the box and grow your understanding of God in order to move forward?
3. Sometimes we wish God was so simple and life so easy that we could box it all up in easy, breeze answers. But God is infinite and life is a mystery, so we often find ourselves confused and confounded. Jeff began Sunday's sermon with a litany of examples of confounding situations – a cancer diagnosis, betrayal by a dear friend, divorce, the untimely death of a loved one, wanting and waiting for a child, feeling called to a certain career path but encountering roadblocks, etc. When we find ourselves in confusing or confounding situations, the Scriptures promise that God stands ready to provide divine guidance *if we're open to it*.
 - a. Jesus said, "When the Spirit of truth comes, the Spirit will guide you into all the truth." John 16:13. Put that verse in your own words. What do you hear it saying?
 - b. In Psalm 32:8, God said, "I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you." Put that verse in your own words.
4. It's one thing for the Bible to promise divine guidance, but quite another for us to figure out how to access that guidance on a practical, operational level in our daily lives. This week's Scripture reading illustrates four different ways we can do that. Read Matthew 2:1-12, as printed on p. 3.
 - a. The wise men in today's passage were magi – i.e., "magicians, enchanters, sorcerers, and astrologers," Daniel 2:2 – from hundreds of miles east of Israel. Unbeknownst to them, in God's plan they were destined to deliver gifts – gold, frankincense, and myrrh – that would fund the escape that would save the life of the Christ child from King Herod. But to accomplish that, they needed divine guidance at every juncture of their journey. **As a first step, they needed to figure out the meaning of the star in the sky; they found the guidance they needed in the Scriptures** (Numbers 24:17). The Scriptures also offer each of us a critical source of guidance. Have someone in your group briefly describe a confusing situation they're facing, then brainstorm in the group for Bible verses the person might want to ponder in considering how to address the situation.
 - b. Do you have a pattern or practice that regularly gets you into the Scriptures? What is your pattern or practice?

- c. When the magi figured out the significance of the star, they felt something within them nudging them to follow the star to see if they could find the Christ child. **Instead of ignoring that inner voice of the Spirit, they heeded it and set out. That was their second critical step.** Suppose someone asked you to explain “the inner voice of the Spirit” – what is it, how do you recognize it? What would you say? Can you give an example from recent events in your life illustrating what it means to hear the voice of the Spirit?
 - d. When the magi reached Jerusalem, they were stumped. The Christ child was not there. But instead of giving up, they heeded the advice of the scribes who said the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. **This was the third critical step. God often speaks to us through the people around us, if we’re listening.** Tell us about a time when someone offering you really wise advice that made a big difference in your life.
 - e. To ultimately find the Christ child, the magi also had to be attentive to the signs and circumstances around them. They encountered a star. Instead of ignoring it, they let it channel them in the right direction. **This was their fourth critical step; they were attentive to where signs and circumstances were leading them.** Wendell Barry once said, “I can't look back from where I am now and feel that I have been very much in charge of my life. Nearly everything important that has happened to me has happened by surprise. So when I have thought I was in charge of my story, I really have been only on the edge of it, carried along.” Your thoughts? Have you found that to be true? Can you give us an example?
5. Although we’ve identified the four key ways God spoke to the magi, none of that would have mattered if the magi hadn’t had the right inner disposition. Jeff said, “The #1 enemy of our ability to hear the voice of God in our lives is a closed mindset.” We have a tendency to want to be in control, to think we know what’s supposed to happen, and to block out any contrary messages. So instead of being curious, inquisitive, attentive, and open to surprises, i.e., an open mindset, we tend to get boxed into our preconceived notions of what God wants and what we’re supposed to be and do.
- a. To receive God’s guidance in our life, Jeff suggested we have to be like someone trying to get out of an escape room or like Angela Lansbury in “Murder She Wrote.” What do you think he meant? Do you agree? What does it look like to live with that mindset?
 - b. Why is it so hard to live with an openness to the voice of God in our lives?
 - c. What are the benefits of living with an openness to the voice of God?
 - d. In our Scripture passage, the magi summon the courage to surrender control and follow the star, not sure where it would lead. What does that star represent in your life right now? Are you ready to follow the star?

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, ²asking, '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.' ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ⁶ "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."'

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then 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.' ⁹When 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. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.

¹¹On 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. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.