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## So, Where is the Messiah?

**Isaiah 60:1-6**  
**Matthew 2:1-12**

Have you ever been on a snipe hunt?

Snipe hunting has long been a way of terrorizing and humbling youngsters who find themselves outdoors at night – a rite of passage overseen by those older and wiser to keep the young in their place.

For a successful snipe hunt, one needs several burlap sacks, a dark night, and a sizable stretch of woods – big enough that no lights can be seen from where we stand. Then, the youngest in the group are given the burlap sacks and told to stand very still in the center of the forest. It is the task of the oldest in the group to take the flashlights and go to find the elusive, night dwelling snipes and scare them so that the snipes will run for the middle of the woods and right for the burlap sacks and so be caught by those who are attentive and waiting – ready for a victorious snipe hunt.

But once the youngsters are left, standing in the dark woods with only their burlap sacks, suddenly the wisdom of snipe hunting becomes questionable. The promise of being a hero, a successful hunter, suddenly seems scary, dark, dangerous and uncertain.

And, if you have ever been on a snipe hunt, then you know that what the older, experienced snipe hunters do is that they leave the younger hunters in the middle of the dark woods, and return to the warmth and security of the campfire where they wait for the young, burlap toting snipe hunters to come slinking back to camp, humiliated once they realize that they have been left standing in the woods – all alone – in the dark.

Imagine Herod's court and palace on the day after the wise men from the East had left for Bethlehem, in search of a nebulous child in a backwater town who was to become the King of the Jews. Because we know narcissistic, power-hungry leaders, we know that chances are good that Herod was chuckling in his coffee the next morning over how smart he was. He had sent the "wise men from the east" on a snipe hunt, but with one very smart twist. Herod had thrown in a bit of convincing, passionate acting about wanting also to worship and adore this new King of the Jews. So, not only had Herod sent the wise men on a snipe hunt, but he had enlisted them, unwittingly, into his own national security planning. He had begged them to

report back to him just in case they actually found anything resembling a new “king of the Jews”. I imagine that the chief priests and scribes are also in on the joke. Snicker, snicker, snort. Did you hear the one about the Persian wise men . . . ha ha ha . . . we always suspected that the Persians were a few bricks shy of a full load. Sent them to Bethlehem . . . snort . . . to find God’s Messiah . . . wink, wink. That Herod! A sly dog. This isn’t his first political rodeo.

And here we are, in the weeks after Christmas. The tree is dry, the credit card bills are due, the laundry has to be done, the job is unsure, the grief is still real, the news is full of anti-Semitic attacks and church shootings, the world appears to be on the brink of war, and we feel like we have been left in the middle of a dark wood holding nothing but a burlap sack.

So, where is the Messiah!?

The prophet Isaiah paints a beautiful word picture of Zion, Israel becoming the very center of the universe for God’s light. The glory of God, Isaiah promises, will descend on Israel and it will be so beautiful, so true, so compelling that the whole world will be attracted and moved to come. And when the world shows up to seek God’s light they will bring the wealth of the world with them – thousands of camels, gold and frankincense, and flocks of sheep and goats – the wealth of the known world will run to come into Jerusalem! And Isaiah proclaims this powerful, beautiful, compelling vision to the Jews who had returned from Babylonian exile to a life that was hard, bleak, scary and dark. They were afraid, discouraged, hungry and many of them felt like they had been sent on a proverbial snipe hunt.

But, Isaiah insists that God is present, even now, working out God’s plan for the redemption of the whole world through the nation of Israel. Yes, it is dark. Yes, the city and the Temple are in ruins. Yes, the neighboring nations are threatening and not happy about the Jews rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. But this is no snipe hunt says Isaiah. There is either a God at work in the world – who knows and loves us and works on reconciling the world – or Isaiah’s prophecy and the wise men’s worship are illusions. If there is no God who may be known, loved and followed, then all we have left are the travel bills, the broken walls, and the dark of being left all alone in the woods. If there is no Messiah, no Emmanuel, no real Christ Child, then the only reality that will prevail is the reality of narcissistic, power hungry rulers who, in the tradition of Herod, are willing to murder innocent children to neutralize any future threat to their power.

You may be here in worship today because this is the day when we remember all those who have died in the last year by calling their names. You may be here because the news is so scary and we are so clearly out of control of world events that threaten to upend our own lives and plans. You may be here, just hoping – against hope – that there really is a God who exists and who cares. Or, you may be here because you do believe that there is a God who exists, who cares and who is at work in the world and in our lives, but you come to worship because it is just hard to keep up that belief when the work is so hard, the grief is so real and when there is so much evidence to the contrary. So, where is the Messiah?

It is my privilege to say that this is no snipe hunt. It is my privilege to invite you to take your eyes off of Herod's palace long enough to turn our eyes and hearts to Bethlehem – that back water Podunk place – and to see and to imagine again what is finally real and true and good.

Yes! The grief is real and those who have died leave gashes and gaps in our lives that can make it hard to breathe. No one can predict what will happen this next year. Will there be world war? Perhaps. Will our jobs be eliminated? Maybe. Will we be diagnosed with cancer, see a beloved succumb to addiction, or have to live through a vindictive and mean divorce? Could be. But, in the midst of that reality, there is a God whose light and presence is so beautiful and compelling that – were they able to see it – the wisest rulers and most powerful Herod's would fall to the ground to worship and would present the riches of their treasuries to this God.

There is a God, who is real. This God made you and me for the purpose of living in love and unity with God's own self and each other, and this God may be known, loved and worshipped even now. The days and weeks after Christmas are only "the days and weeks after Christmas" unless God is real and may be known.

I beg of you. Make room in your life, make room in your schedule, make room in your heart and mind for this God to be known. There is a real, loving God who made you, knows you and claims you. We are not just holding burlap bags in the darkness. Yes, Isaiah's picture is hard to believe. Exile, war and pain are easier to imagine, but that doesn't make God any less real. Decide now to seek God, to know God, to love God. Ask the people who are ahead of you on the journey of faith, "Where do you see God at work? How do you know that God is real?"

I find the very real presence of God in reading and studying Scripture, in the wholehearted participation in worship (this is very different from indifferent or passive attendance), in quiet and solitude, in contemplative prayer, in charitable and generous giving and in the service of those who are in need.

God is here, in the love you feel from those sitting around you. God is here, in the bread and the juice, inviting you to taste and see that God is good. God is here, in the loving memories of those who have loved us and who now have gone ahead of us into the Kingdom of God – where the darkness is dispersed by the light of God's presence and where our "hearts shall thrill and rejoice" (Isa 60:5). God is real. God is present. Herod's kingdom will not get the last laugh. It is Herod, and his ilk, who will be left holding the burlap sacks in the darkness. God's rule is real.