

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Mary Newberg Gale
Sunday, December 22, 2024

Friends, I invite you to join me in the spirit of prayer. Let us pray.

Loving and gracious God, you speak words of comfort and hope and challenge across the centuries. We gather again today to hear those words, to be changed by them, and to be sent home a different way—a way that is following your path, your journey, your kingdom. Amen.

Our scripture reading this morning comes from the second chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, verses 1-12, and tells, as Jeanene shared with our children, the story of the Magi and their journey to the Christ Child. Hear these words from our early church ancestors.

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star in the east and have come to pay him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him, and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet:

*'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.' "*

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then 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." When they had heard the king, they set out, and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen in the east, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On 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. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Friends, these are the words of Our Lord. Thanks be to God.

This Sunday, the fourth Sunday in Advent, finds us at the fourth and final of our Advent sermon series. Of course, we will hear more on Christmas Eve, but as we have talked about Holiday Gatherings, this one gets to be kind of the bookend for us before we celebrate that magical night. We have talked about the prophets, we've talked about Mary and Elizabeth, we've talked about shepherds and angels, and now here we are in the Gospel of Matthew talking about the Magi. Like many of those stories that are familiar to us in our scriptures, I think it's important for us to take a minute to think about what we know about this story and what we think we know about this story. If you were paying very close attention to the text, you'll notice that Matthew does not specify the number, the gender, the background, the kingship of any of these people. We don't know that there were three. Scholars have, or not even scholars, Church tradition has said that because there were three gifts. We imagine three in our head. It says nothing about them being men. It says nothing about them being Kings. If you joined us on December 8th for our children's musical between the services, you might remember one of those children pointing out that there

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were an indeterminate number of wise people. That is where we find ourselves here. We know, even though it's not the way we tell the story, we know that they were not there on the night of the birth. If these people saw the stars change at Jesus's birth, the travel to Bethlehem would have taken years, so not a baby in a cradle but a child running and playing much like those that we had gathered up forward with us a moment ago. I don't know about you, but for me when I hear wise men or Magi, I have this image in my head, the silhouette of the three men on three camels following that star in the sky. No one in the world at that time made a journey that ill equipped. There would not have been three individuals on three camels traipsing across the desert. This would have been, as I said, a journey of years, so it would have been a caravan. It would have been these wise people, their servants, some food for them along the way, multiple camels, tents so that they could camp as they were going. It was a caravan of people, not those, necessarily...those three silhouettes that we picture when we think wise men. Now we don't know exactly what the Magi were. Matthew doesn't tell us. They could have been magicians or scholars or royal priests of foreign kingdoms or astronomers. We do know that the term that we translate as Magi is a term where we...it's the root word for our term magic, of course, and it is used pejoratively every other time in the New Testament. This is the only time the term is used with honorifics in any way. I wonder how much attention we modern people would have made of this Testament of the Magi if we understood them deeply as the people who were focused on the rising signs and the stars in the sky. They knew people's birth charts. They might have messed with crystals. Those are not the kind of people that we now necessarily put a lot of trust in. We do know that these people, however many they were, were outsiders—outsiders that played a central role in Matthew's gospel. They take the place of the shepherds and angels that witness the birth from the Gospel of Luke, but even though they are outsiders, Matthew's text takes great pains to connect them to the ancient Hebrew traditions. Their journey is referenced and references back to a prophecy in Isaiah, chapter 60, that talks about the Gentiles and all the nations coming from east and west and north and south to gather at the table of Our Lord. The star in the sky is an allusion to the Book of Numbers where it says a star shall come forth out of Jacob. Things happen to the Magi and to the other members of the royal family, Jesus's royal family in Matthew, in dreams. Where else in our history, our shared Biblical history, have things happened in dreams, has God moved in dreams? In Daniel, in Joseph, in prophets—that same God that was active in their dreams, Matthew is saying, is active in the dreams of these foreign people who are searching for the Holy One.

Now Herod is so creepy in this story that the Magi go home by another road. Whatever he says to them when he...whatever undertone and subtext there is when he sends them to find the baby Jesus and he says, “When you find him, come back and tell me where he is so I can pay him homage.” Whatever subtext was in there, the wise men knew and were told again in a dream it was not safe to return. I was struck by how the text says “upon hearing the news of the birth of the king of the Jews, Herod was frightened and all of Jerusalem was frightened with him.” That says a lot about the kind of ruler King Herod was. These Magi in our story, they get a front row seat to witness the promise and the threat of the newborn Christchild. They get to see God's unexpected presence and grace and love and joy. They get to see how the birth of this King means that the old organization of the world doesn't take precedence anymore. The outsiders,

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those Magi, get the Messiah while the Jewish religious authorities do not. These Magi see how Jesus himself and all those around him become a threat to the status quo. In the very next chapter Herod, when the wise men do not return to him, he orders the execution of all children under the age of two and the slaughter of the Innocents in the rest of the second chapter of Matthew. This story in the second chapter is basically in a real sense the gospel in miniature. The journey that the Magi took would have been difficult and treacherous. It was not something that was taken lightly. As I said a moment ago, it would have been a journey of years. So gathered here today at the close of this year when the light is re-entering our world, when the days begin to outnumber the length of the nights, we, at the turn of the calendar year, are re-evaluating and reflecting, perhaps grieving and lost. Perhaps we come desperate for a glimpse of new life to spring out of what seems to be the barren Earth all around us.

That in itself is a journey fraught with peril and pain, and yet once again we find ourselves here witnessing the Advent of the Christchild in our midst. As we see ourselves reflected in the Journey of the Magi, it begs the question. What are we searching for? We are in a time of deep searching, culturally and individually, I would argue, searching that is connected to some deep interior longing, a longing to make sense of the world, a deep longing to fit in, for comfort. We're looking for peace, for encouragement, for someone to see us and know us. We want to be a part of something. We want to feel whole again. Sometimes we are seeking without even realizing it, and I think that that's dangerous for us, because we are looking to fill a space we can't even really acknowledge to ourself is there. And when that's the case, we fill it with junk. We are filling it with things that on their own are not bad, but they are not connected and will not feed that hunger in us. We fill it with noise, with busyness. We fill it with other people. We fill it with our work. Sometimes we fill it with literal stuff to distract us from that deep, deep longing inside.

This season what are you seeking for yourself and seeking for others? Our text talks about different kinds of seeking, actually. Are we seeking like the wisemen? Are we seeking God, or, like Herod, are we seeking to prop up our own authority and power? Or maybe in a kinder phrasing, are we seeking to make ourselves feel good? Or even like the religious authorities, are we seeking to keep the status quo, even desperately seeking loopholes that say 'well, that isn't what Jesus really meant when he said it is harder for a rich man to go into heaven than the camel to go through the eye of a needle? That's a metaphor.' Or 'that's not what Jesus really meant when he told the young ruler to sell all that he had and to follow.' Or 'that's not what it really means to love your enemy and to turn your cheek.' The more I've sat with this story, the more I have...I have bumped up against something that the text kind of glosses over. The Magi were surprised, but the story and the way we tell it says they just rolled with that surprise. The Magi come from a long distance seeking something. They were expecting one thing, and they found something entirely different. They come looking for the birth of a king, so they go to the place where kings are, to the palaces and the places of authority, but what they're searching for is not there. They had to shift, to be surprised, and to move to find what they were looking for, and they came and they knelt and they worshiped and they presented their gifts. They didn't let the surprise wreck their plan. It wasn't what they expected when they started out, but they still did

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what they came to do; and, perhaps more importantly, they left changed. They left on a changed path. They went home by another way.

So this season I think that the Magi ask us, “Are we willing to be surprised by God in our searching and in our seeking, in our deep longing for the holy?” Are we willing to be redirected? Are we willing to be encouraged to set something that we think is very, very precious aside? Are we willing to stop guiding ourselves and to be guided by the work of the Spirit? How is God leading us home differently as we turn the corner into a new year?

Now this text is typically a text we read at Epiphany, just like the story of Advent that we tell and the story of the birth of the Christchild, the story of Epiphany is a reminder that it's not something that just happened once. This is not just history for us. We tell the story again and again. We talk about Emmanuel, God With Us, and the Epiphany of Our Lord because it is an ongoing manifestation of the Divine in our world. So how do we today and in the coming days find our way to the wonder and the joy and the challenge of the manger? How do we sit with the reality that God chose the dust and the muck and the smell of a stable in a backwater town that no one would have expected? It's a reminder for us that God's ways are not our ways, and God's thoughts are not our thoughts, as the psalmist says. How do we disengage from the busyness that we have created for ourselves, from the rat race of our world, from the noise around us, and journey anew into the presence of the Divine? Because once you experience the presence of God, nothing is ever the same. The Magi went home by a different road, changed people. Even for us in the face of the presence of the Christchild, the old roads lead us in circles. The old patterns don't produce anything new. In the birth of this Christchild, the structures that the world tells us to value— structures of authority and power and might—they fall flat in the presence of a God who calls and serves the least and the lost, the God who welcomes all, who values compassion, who speaks words of hope and peace and joy and love into a world that seems ever more in short supply. So, friends, this season it is my hope that as we are called on a different path, God gives us the strength to follow that road home. Amen.