

“New Possibilities”
Matthew 2:1-12
January 3, 2021; Second Sunday of Christmas

I love this congregation. And yet I’m curious about what compels you to worship. Why do you tune-in or log-on to listen to this? I have been around long enough to know that there are many reasons for that. It’s almost certainly not the preacher!

Many of you worship out of habit. You do this week-in and week-out. There may a few others who — if it weren’t for COVID — would be eating with friends at Rise-N-Dine. But my guess is that regardless of your motivations and how long you have attended this church — you’re a seeker. You’re still looking.

In my experience over the years, seekers tend to have interesting characteristics. Many tend to stay more toward the back of the sanctuary. Quite often the last couple pews of any given church get the most use from those who are looking for something. Such folk don’t come up toward the front, not real close. Maybe they’re not quite ready to commit themselves to discipleship and the church, so they hang back, sitting at a distance. Others, well, maybe they just don’t want to be

perceived as “showy” by sitting closer up front. Others don’t want to draw any attention. Still others may be a little shy. Our church isn’t unique in any of these regards.

Whatever the reasons why people will sit in the places that they do, I can tell you, from my experience, that our church would probably be very sparse if, I declared, “Next Sunday, I don’t want anyone to bother worshiping but the thoroughly committed, those who are absolutely certain about their faith.”

I’m glad that you seekers — wherever you may be this morning — are listening in, that your life journey has brought you to spend some time with us. This could be a good Sunday for you, because our scripture is a story about some people on a journey, people engaged in a search for new possibilities. Today we focus on those seekers from eastern lands, the wise men who came to Bethlehem to see Jesus. With this story we conclude our celebration of Christmas with the Feast of the Epiphany.

Many of us have already concluded our Christmas celebrations. Maybe it was a little less than past years. We put away the tree and the decorations, and exchanged the gifts. But the church in its wisdom

entreats us to linger just a while longer to reflect upon the meaning of Christmas before we too far into a new year. These seekers from the east have something to teach us, if we will pause, and reflect, if we will walk with them a while along their journey.

This is a beloved story of visitors from the East who journeyed to



Bethlehem and knelt at the feet of the Christ-child. It's such a vivid story, that it continued to be

developed by believers even after Matthew first told it. For one thing, a tradition arose that there were three wise men. But notice Matthew doesn't say actually say how many there were. He says that these wise men offered three kinds of gifts to Jesus — gold, frankincense, and myrrh — but he doesn't say that there were three of them. And where do we get the notion that they were “kings”? In many Bible translations, Matthew calls them “magi,” that is, magicians, people who dealt in very strange magic potions, who used incantations to perform certain feats of

magic. They were people who looked at the stars, trying to figure out the course of the world. But we're not told all of that about them, at least not by Matthew. What we're told is that they were people on a journey, seeking something, following a star. They were searching for new possibilities.

These wise men came from the east, from some country far away. They seem to be exotic, strange visitors at the manger of Bethlehem. And yet, there's a sense in which we, in our present age, know them well. They will get to their destination, that's the promise, but not before a long trip. You and I live in a strange age of intense seeking, of longing, and yearning, where life can be conceived of as a search, a journey. People are looking, searching.

Remember when it was popular for churches to offer what was called a "seekers service" — perhaps a service on Saturday evening, or early on Sunday morning, or later on Sunday night? It was meant to be a worship time for those who may have had no church background, or who lacked a present, clear, firm Christian commitment. You would think that such alternatives might be attractive to unchurched, seeking

people, for this is still an age of searching. In fact, in many ways, our post-Christian culture has become even more suspicious of people who are absolutely sure of where they are, confident in their destination. Seekers are perhaps more comfortable not with those who can say for certain that, “I have absolutely found what I’m looking for” and “I have it all figured out” but with those who can say, “I haven’t arrived yet, I’m still searching” and “I still haven’t found what I’m looking for.”

So I’m saying that today could be your day, the day for every would-be seeker and searcher, the day when the magi are on their journey, looking for the Messiah, the Promised One, the Presence of God with us.

These people, who came to the manger, were not three, they weren’t necessarily wise, and they weren’t necessarily kings. They were all people on a journey.

The magi were strange and foreign. The guess is that they must have come from Persia, which is modern-day Iran. They weren’t Jews, not people of the book. They were aliens. And yet they were the first ones to see that Jesus was the Christ, the first ones to worship him. How

surprising it is that Matthew, among the most Jewish of the Gospel writers, has these magi as the first to see Jesus for who he is. These foreigners are the first to worship him, the first to offer him gifts.

They're the ones who — lacking a certainty about where the Messiah was to be born and about whom he is — lacking the Scriptures themselves, are on a search. Others may be content to settle down, going over the old slogans and formulae, keeping to well-worn paths, but the magi venture forth — seeking new possibilities.

The magi were outsiders. They were magicians, those who attempted to use magic, the tricks of their trade, to manage the forces of nature. Let's not be too quick to make a distinction between what we call "religion" and what we call "magic." It's sad to say that a lot of what passes for religion are magic tricks — attempts to control the powers that press in upon us, an attempt to manage the frightening, mysterious, and unmanageable aspects of the world.

Matthew begins his Gospel, the most Jewish of the four gospels, the Gospel where everything is backed up by reference to the Hebrew Scriptures. He begins by saying that it was these outsiders, these pagans,

these magicians who were the very first to come to the child Jesus, to see him for who he was, to lay down their gifts and worship him. In other words, Matthew says that this child is God's gift for the whole world, the people out beyond the boundaries, the people who get confused about these boundaries between respectable religion and primitive magic.

And thus in so many ways, this Christ-child is for us. There are many of us, regardless of where we may be currently seated, regardless of how long we may have attended church, who aren't that familiar with scripture. There are many of us who check-in on this church, not for any theological purpose, not to ponder the significance of the doctrine of the Incarnation, but simply to try to get a handle on life. In certain ways you don't know which way to turn. Your life feels uncontrollable, difficult, and mysterious. You may be hoping that something useful might actually be said today, that you might be given some insight during the praying or the video or the music, that will help you to cope, that will help you to manage. Though you probably wouldn't put it this way, you maybe are hoping for some magic formula whereby you will be able to get a grip on life. Well, if that's the case, this story is for you.

The child Jesus and his family didn't reject the gifts of the magi. Even though they were from an exotic, alien land, even though they didn't know the scriptures and were strange magicians who had the kind of faith Israel specifically condemned, Mary and Joseph didn't turn them away when they appeared in Bethlehem. Jesus's family accepted the magi's gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, which they laid at the manger.

I believe this is good news because I expect that there are some people, perhaps some listening today, who affiliate in one way or another with this congregation who still feel a bit like an outsider. You don't know that much of scripture. The words of the Bible seem strange to you. You may not quite understand the words of the worship liturgy — let alone what that word “liturgy” means. It could be that on some Sundays you're not all that familiar with much of anything and have some difficulty getting a feel for things. It's as if you have come from another land to this strange world called “Christianity.” And yet, you come as a seeker, you're a searcher. There's no such thing as an “expert” Christian. If you come across one of those, turn around and run!

Apparently God has nothing else to show them. It's okay for us to admit that the essential identity of our congregation is that we're seeking and that we're all perpetual beginners on the journey. We're here because we're looking for something more. The worldly wisdom, by which you function in much of your life isn't adequate to the task of the demands of your life at this point. The stars you have been following, by which you have made your way through the world, are growing dim, and you're looking for a more trust-worthy guide. You may not think of yourself as a particularly gifted person. You may not consider yourself blessed with great spiritual perception, not destined to perform heroic and saintly deeds. And yet you have come searching, and you offer what you have. And if you should encounter God, something beyond the stars, you're willing to lay down what you have at the manger and worship.

In all these ways, you can identify with these magi. This story is for you. Because this is the first Sunday of the year, it's a popular time for New Year's resolutions. New Year's is a time to start over, to start fresh, to begin again, and to set out on another direction in our lives.

I'm told that most of the advertisements for diet programs and diet aids take place in late December — early January. There are more advertisements for dieting in the first two weeks of January than in the rest of the year combined.

It appears for many people that the beginning of a new year is the time to turn over a new leaf, to lose those extra pounds, and to begin new things.

Matthew says that the magi “went home by another way.” Did those magi make the equivalent of a New Year's resolution? After worshiping before Jesus, offering their gifts, how were they changed? They surely couldn't have been the people who they formerly were.

What New Year's resolutions might we make among our congregation, in this season of the church year? How might we respond to the demanding, transforming love that encounters us at the manger? How might this transforming love be carried with us as we enter a new year? Love must be absolutely characteristic of our life together especially as we discern God's direction regarding our congregation's

future relationship with the denomination and General Conference resolutions about human sexuality.

I don't know all the motivations among you, what journey, what seeking, what twistings and turnings have peaked your interest for this thing called church. But I do know this: if you will dare to come to the manger, to kneel, lay what you have before the Christ-child, then I

promise that you will go home another way with new possibilities.

That other way is the way of eternal life with the one, true God.



Lord Jesus, You came to us, You manifested your glory, your light shining in the darkness. You searched for us and found us. Grant us the wisdom to search for you, to seek you, and, in seeking, to find you, to embrace you as the source of our lives, the hope of our world, the light in our darkness. Amen.