

## Gifts from Afar?

Menno Mennonite Church  
January 5, 2020

**Purpose:** To call the congregation to continue to seek the kingdom being gifted along the way.

**Message:** As followers we are called to continue to seek the way of the kingdom as we seek the promise of its vision.

**Scripture:** Matthew 2: 1-12 [I will read], Isaiah 60: 1-6 Secondary (First) Reading

**Synopsis:** The way we anticipate things is not how they end up being, especially in the timing that we have in mind. We have goals that we chase after, things that we want to accomplish, and often we find ourselves frustrated when things do not develop in the ways we would have the come to being. We find ourselves impatiently seeking the next big thing, the next big revelation of our life. Often this seeking for the big goals can blind us from the more subtle development coming into being all around us. When we are more clear about the deep goals that we seek—the values, the conditions that we desire-- as opposed to the more grandious, but particular goals of accomplishment and achievement, we find ourselves in line with the ways of the kingdom coming to fruition around us.

**Matthew 2:1-10** <sup>NIV</sup> **Matthew 2:1** After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem <sup>2</sup> and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him." <sup>3</sup> When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. <sup>4</sup> When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. <sup>5</sup> "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: <sup>6</sup> "'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.'" <sup>7</sup> Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup> He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him." <sup>9</sup> After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. <sup>10</sup> When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.

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<sup>11</sup> On coming to the house,  
they saw the child  
with his mother Mary,  
and they bowed down and worshiped him.

Then they opened their treasures  
and presented him with gifts of gold  
and of incense  
and of myrrh.

<sup>12</sup> And having been warned in a dream  
not to go back to Herod,  
they returned to their country by another route.

Who doesn't like a good quest? To go on quest, an intentional expedition to find one thing or another, is a quintessentially human activity. A quest is an activity where we go looking for something which, when we get down to it, we have no actual experience of what it really will be like when we get there. We look to find our keys; we quest to bring our imagination into being, seeking something that we hope to find but generally don't know what shape it comes in. Sure we might imagine what it will be like, or summon ourselves to consider our expectations, but until we are there, until we have reached the end of quest, come what may, we will not know whether what we quest after has any truth to it. Other animals may travel great distances to find food, to mate, or to simply to make it back up the river from which they spawned, moving out of genetic imperative. Yet we set out seeking what we do not know, hoping in what ever way we may to be made better in the process.

Any good quest has to have a hero; those individuals who come in on snowy white steeds ready to face down the most fearful dragons, and do what needs to be done. This story is no different. Our traditional, Nativity scene models for these guys speaks of stately, regal dignity, bending low to present the newly born baby with gifts fit for a king. Generally, though, they are hanging out along the edges, coming to see the wonder at the babe away in the manger, but along the side and looking in. They are the wise men, yes, but we have to wonder at their behavior and whether it was really was wise. When we look a little bit deeper, we quickly see that these are not our traditional heroic figures. Have you ever noticed that they are headed the wrong way? Seriously. If we take the traditional speculation that these were kings out of Persia following a star that rose in the East, how in the world did they end up in Judea, well to the West of their neighborhood? It has always made me wonder. Then they get lost on the way there, and have to stop and ask for directions from the friendly neighborhood dictator, not thinking anything is at all that weird when this same guy takes an decidedly unhealthy interest in the child of Bethlehem. In a lot of ways, these three kings got a lot of things wrong. These guys were sincere and persistent, sure. Wise—not so much.

Yet, these people, as incompetent, naïve and ham-handed as they may have been, set out on a quest. They took the first step, that fearsome step when the invitation of the road and encountering the new finally, slowly, overtakes the better sense that would keep us dry and warm

at home, not running after some star, no matter how peculiar it might be. They found a way in the midst of the heavy weight of *things as they are*, as they always have been, to find enough vision to take the risk of hitting the road, to risk being swept off in the grand scheme of things, into something bigger than themselves. And that takes a great deal of faith, hope, courage, and imagination because no matter how prepared they thought they were, no matter how good their stellar cartography, they could not be fully prepared for what came after they decided to step out into the unknown.

Our world is full of signs and wonders. Our lives are full of ‘stars in the east.’ Even in the vast periods of time that defy our very imaginations, there are always things that would call to us, speak to us, lead us onward, if we have eyes to see them and courage to but take that first step and follow where it leads. To be sure, not every light in the sky that catches our eye is worth following, is worth setting out on a quest to find. Often, we become so overwhelmed with the options and the task of discerning between the lights, between the sparkling invitation to the quest and the glittery distraction that will lead us nowhere, that we stop looking for the rising star inviting us into what God is doing here and now. And even if we do see it, we often are pressed to wonder whether it is we who are called to follow, we who must embark on the quest into something new, something foreign, in the faint hope of finding something of value at the end of our quest. Surely not I Lord might be our basic response. We end up wondering why anyone would leave hearth and home to take on something so fool-hearty as seeking an epiphany, seeking again the revelation of God in our midst in our time, in our place. In the grand scheme of time and space, does it that much difference whether we set out on the quest or not? We would much rather sit and admire the beauty of the heavens from afar than to risk becoming involved in where they might lead. Questing is dangerous—and most of us simply don’t have the time or the interest to be led anew.

Yet, here we stand at a new year. It is hard not to examine the sky at a moment like this and see what the stars might be say. We are invited to ask ourselves in this time, in this place ‘what is it that I seek’ after what do I embark on a quest? What are you seeking? These wise men had their eyes wide open, frantically searching for a sign, for something to lead them. The question we must ask ourselves as we begin this journey of the year is whether or not we are

open to the signs around us, whether or not we are listening for God's word and looking for the Kingdom of God in our midst? What are we looking for, and why do we set out in the first place?

W. H. Auden, the great 20<sup>th</sup> century poet, wrote an epic poem of the Christmas story called *For the Time Being* which was turned into an Oratorio. His treatment of the Magi is most interesting. He has them speaking to the Star of Nativity that is actively warning them not to come saying "I am the Star most dreaded by the wise, for they will be drawn against their will to me.... I shall deprive you of your minor tasks." The first Wise Man replies, "To discover how to be truthful now is the reason I follow this star." And then the second, "To discover how to be living now is the reason I follow this star." Finally, the third speaks, "To discover how to be loving now is the reason I follow this star." Then, in concert, the three speak, "To discover how to be human now is the reason we follow this star."

To discover how to be human now is the reason we are invited to follow the light of the world. That is our quest. That is our revelation here and now. In this day of Epiphany, of the revelation of the light of the world, we are invited to open our eyes anew to the signs and wonders all around us, even when our better judgment would suggest that we keep ourselves at home, safe and sound. We are invited to look again toward the wonder of all time—the mystery of God made flesh—and to join the quest of the kingdom coming. And how tempted we are to the easy answers describing who and what we follow after. We are tempted to stop with a couple easy canned phrases of who and what Jesus is and leave it at that. But when we truly seek the one who lies before us, to actually meet him and be formed by when, with the kingdom of God at the foundation of our quest, we are taken by surprise all the time with the new definitions that are found, the new insights that are offered to us, the new revelations that will blossom before our very eyes if we but have the courage to follow after toward the star of Bethlehem.

Oh, my people, Arise, shine, for your light has come. Your light has come and you are being invited to step out on the road yet again and participate in the dawning of a new reality all around us. My question to you as we stand again at this dawn, at this new year, at this new

epiphany, is simply asking you to think about what it is that calls you forth to take the risk of the quest, the risk of discovery, the risk of hope. What do you seek? Sit with that, study that, and hold that before you, because what we seek often, quite often, determines what we find.