

“Seekers, Strangers, and Stargazers”
Preached by Rev. Carol Reynolds
First Congregational Church, UCC, Cadillac, MI

Isaiah 60:1-6, Matthew 2:1-12 Homily
January 6, 2013
For Private Distribution Only

Three wise men following a star—and the instructions of a paranoid King Herod—to the Christ child in Bethlehem, where they greet, adore, and bestow upon the boy precious gifts--this is such a beloved and well known nativity scene. Perhaps the fact that, as a young child, “We Three Kings” was my favorite Christmas carol and “The Little Drummer Boy” my favorite Christmas special, speaks in part to the popularity of these images. But the reality is, this was a cameo appearance for the magi. They are unique to the gospel of Matthew, playing a similar role to the shepherds in the gospel of Luke, and, once they return home, we never hear from or about them again. We don’t know exactly when they came, whether it corresponded to Jesus’ birth or fell as many as two years after the fact. We don’t really know that there were actually three of them. That’s been assumed based upon the number of gifts they gave baby Jesus. And, frankly, we don’t know who they were. Were they really kings? Did they really come from the East? Were they really non-Jews, as we’ve been led to believe because of their unfamiliarity with Jewish prophecy about the birth of the Messiah?

Scholars have argued these points, and the closest they seem to have come to a consensus is that the magi were Gentiles, but not necessarily kings; probably priests of the Zoroastrian religion--light followers and light bearers--likely from Persia, the land we know today as Iran. The word “magi” derives from the Greek word for magic, which seems to confirm that they were astrologer magicians. The upshot is that, as one commentator has said, "The magi are Gentiles in the extreme, characters who could not be more remote from the Jewish citizens of Jerusalem in

heritage and worldview."¹ In other words, as pagan seekers and stargazers, the magi were the ultimate strangers in Jesus' homeland. Not people one would ever have expected to stumble into the nativity scene, let alone to have appreciated the significance of this unlikely toddler king, born into poverty and ordinariness as he was.

So here we find ourselves at that day on the church calendar known as Epiphany, a word that means revealing, illumination or manifestation. For many Protestants, Epiphany is viewed as something of a breather, a brief reprieve before we launch into the next big liturgical cycle, Lent. But, in the Eastern Church; that is, the Orthodox Church, Epiphany is actually considered a more important festival day than Christmas! That may strike us as a little odd, but, if you think about it, it is Epiphany—the season of light and clarity—that helps us begin to interpret and live into the significance and the mystery of the Christmas Eve birth.

In most progressive Christian churches, I'm guessing that this morning you could hear a message being preached about religious pluralism. This text is often held up as proof positive that the Christ light is universal and embraces everyone, no matter where they may fall on the religious spectrum; but also as evidence that access to God and to truth are available through a variety of spiritual paths, not only Christianity. We could certainly go there today, but that's a message you've already heard preached here on a number of occasions, and one that many of us already embrace wholeheartedly. So I'd like us to take a slightly different route today: Instead of imagining ourselves in the role of the magi, being so strongly drawn to the light of Christ across ethnic, religious, and political boundaries; I'd like for us to imagine ourselves in the manger scene or at the house of Mary and Joseph at the time of the wise men's arrival. Or, to bring this into our own time and context, to imagine that the magi have glimpsed Christ's light shining out

¹Davis, Mark, "Stars and Prophets in Alignment," <http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/>, January 1, 2013.

onto East Harris Street from a crack under our front doorway, and have ventured inside to find out what it's all about, to be touched and warmed by its glow, and to discover how it might enrich their own unique spiritual journeys. As seekers and stargazers from a distant land, they're obviously strangers to the area and the Church, and so they don't necessarily wander into our sanctuary in time for our official time of greeting and welcome at the beginning of the service. In fact, maybe they trudge in right about now, in the middle of the sermon, emanating joy and wonder, wearing their telltale brocade robes, carrying heavy wooden treasure chests, and leading smelly, spitting camels down the aisles, all the while leaving a distinct trail of Eastern dust on the carpet. A real sight to behold. And a pretty major interruption to this worship service already in progress.

How would we respond? With eye rolling, head shaking, heavy sighs, and conspirational “tsk, tsk's” to one another in the pews? With warm smiles and open arms? Or somewhere in between? Think about it for a moment...as honestly as you can. [Pause]

Now, admittedly, we don't tend to get a lot of kings or camels coming through Cadillac, let alone to this church, so this is probably a bit of a stretch for us to envision. Agricultural area that we are, we're way more familiar with shepherds. But, getting back to the magi, we do see people of other faiths, nationalities, ethnicities, and economic statuses here. We ourselves are some of those very people. Or they are people we know from other parts of our lives in Cadillac. But, from time to time, we do receive people into our midst whom we've never met or even heard of before—strangers. We don't have a frame of reference for them either because they're not from here or because they don't run in any of our circles. They're not part of our book group or the book study at the Shay or even Audubon. They've never worked for CAPS, the ISD, the DEQ,

the DNR, or any other of the alphabet soup of Cadillac employers. Heck, they're not even friends of friends! And so we can't help but be a little suspicious. Like King Herod and Jerusalem, we can't help but be a little frightened. Who are they, anyway?? And why exactly are they here?

When I first moved to Cadillac, I decided to give the Cadillac Welcome Club a try. I was eager to make friends outside of the church and to interact with people who were going through the same adjustment process I was, having just arrived in Michigan from many miles away. Imagine my surprise, then, when I began to be introduced around and to ask people how long they had been in Cadillac. I expected to hear 6 months, maybe one or two years at most. But instead I was hearing double digits, as in 12+ years! Finally I learned that years ago the Cadillac Welcome Club had defected from the official national Newcomers Club because they didn't want to follow its cut-off rules. They wanted to be able to stay in the group indefinitely. These were and would be their friends, people not from Cadillac, people who had been in Cadillac for less than two decades... If you are at all familiar with the social sciences, you will have some idea of what a closed system is and know that some of those rules apply here...

I can't help but believe that Mary and Joseph must have been at least a little taken aback when these unexpected strangers from a distant land arrived on their doorstep. Who wouldn't be, right? And so I find it significant that they let them into the house. They let them see and adore their precious baby and, as far as we know, they accepted their generous, very valuable gifts. In that moment, I don't imagine the family had much use for gold or frankincense or myrrh, but one day they would. And, either way, accepting those gifts was in itself an act of hospitality and graciousness. Of course, if the wise men had brought something destructive like weapons or toxic substances, it would have been a different story. All bets would have been off. But they

didn't. What they brought had not only worth, but relevance: They brought intuition--inner knowing and a fresh perspective. They brought gold to acknowledge kingship, frankincense to burn to pay homage to God, and myrrh to anoint and eventually embalm a body. Gifts that could essentially cover the entire life cycle of this holy new life. As well as tell Mary and Joseph a little more about the significance of their mysterious young son and the life that he would lead.

Like the Little Drummer Boy of the TV special, we can and should think about the gifts we're able to bring to the Christ child. We can and should embrace the fact that, whether we're rich or poor by the world's standards, we all have something valuable to bring. We can recite the old proverb that it's better to give than to receive. But we can also do more than that. We can also acknowledge our Christian identities as receivers of God's precious gift of incarnation. As members of the United Church of Christ and believers in a StillSpeaking God, we can grasp that this was not a one time gift, but a gift that keeps on giving. Over and over and over again. Over the miles and the centuries... We can comprehend that the light of Christ is a gift that comes in many shapes and sizes, many of them unfamiliar and completely unexpected. And we can rejoice and receive them into our hearts with joy and wonder and, well, frankly, curiosity. We may not completely grasp their significance right off the bat. It may take years for that to be revealed. But that's okay. This church isn't going anywhere. We've got the time. We've got the space. We've got the coffee. We've got the love to spare. So let's begin here and now, today.

Let us warmly receive the persons, the gifts and perspectives of the seekers, the strangers, and the starseekers at our Communion table. But not only there. Let us open the fellowship circles at our coffee hour tables and well beyond. And let us begin to absorb the possibility that we may be

even more blessed and honored to receive them than they are to have found their way to us--this inclusive, progressive little church we hold so dear.

Amen.