

We Keep Seeking
Sermon 167 | Greystone Baptist Church | January 8, 2023
Matthew 2:1-23

Today we mark the end of our journey through Advent and Christmastide. These last six weeks we have been exploring the theme *From Generation to Generation*. Through it we have remembered the stories of old, those that reach way back to the beginning of creation and bear witness to God's love at work in the world all along the way. These holy stories are our legacy of faith, a treasure for us to read, remember, and retell throughout our whole lives. They are a gift. As is the case with any good gift, there comes a responsibility. Our responsibility with these stories is to recognize that they can not end with us. The legacy must live on. The good news of God's presence, God's care, God's faithfulness, God's love for all of creation must live on because it is precisely this good news that will sustain our children and their children and their children when trouble and strife come.

We know this because we have experienced it in our own lives. And if we are finding it difficult to feel it in the midst of struggle we lean on the testimonies of our friends who will remind us that *God is with us, when nobody else is*. Remember that from last week?

It is beautifully ironic that our confidence is in something so mysterious and unknowable. We are certain in that which is un-certifiable. We believe in the midst of disbelief and doubt. We hope in the face of despair. We find joy in the midst of sorrow. And we do so because we know that there is so much we do not know. (1 Corinthians 13:12 For now we see through a glass dimly... *No, [we] know in part...*)

This is an unpopular position in today's world where information is so readily available. All we have to do is ask *Alexa*, or pull out our smartphones and type in our questions. Within seconds the most trivial information can be found right at our fingertips if not blaring at us through the speaker of our google or amazon or apple devices that are constantly listening, lying in wait for an opportunity to arm us with information. There is no more need to think about the question itself, to allow time to shape it, experience to inform it, and our relationships with companions of inquiry to contribute their perspectives as we all work together toward discovery. No, that kind of seeking and searching is a thing of the past. It is an antiquated approach because everything we need to know can be found in an instant.

We live in an age of certainty and yet our heritage, our legacy, our story itself is one that is full of mystery.

There is perhaps no greater example of this than the story of the magi who travel from the East signaling the change from Christmastide to Epiphany, from one season to the next, the end of one journey and the beginning of another.

Matthew is the only Gospel that saw fit to include this part of the nativity story and yet the wise men or the magi complete nearly every nativity scene. We stumble over their names because *magi* (the word Matthew uses) doesn't mean a whole lot to twenty-first-century

Americans. It is a foreign word without direct translation. We also call them *wise men* as the term *magi* is often translated in our Bibles. When we sing about them, they are Kings from the East, reminding us that in this story at least, politics and religion are woven together in the very bodies that propel the story forward. Each choice of word conveys a different nuance and exposes different meanings to these foreigners and their pilgrimage to Bethlehem.

The title of “King” stretches at least back to the second century when the apologist Tertullian saw the connection between Matthew 2 and Isaiah 60 which says: *Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn...and all from Sheba will come bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the Lord.*¹ This idea that magi are kings, has endured through the centuries, peaking in popularity during the medieval times when notions of royal power and prestige were common. If we decide to keep the name and call the magi Kings today - a day of presidents and senators and chancellors and prime ministers - then what might we learn? And what might *these* kings have to teach us?

Maybe it would be easier to just call them Wise Men. After all, this is a good translation, well, as long as we don't lose the “from Persia” part. We could call them wise men from Persia because it was common for kings, in the ancient world, to consult men from the East who paid attention to the stars, who valued dreams, and who would interpret them both (stars and dreams) for the kings who had a great deal of interest about what the supernatural world might be telling them about their power and their reigns. So if we choose to call them Wise Men, not only do the words make more sense to us, but the historical connection is consistent with the text. Herod was certainly paying attention to these wise men traveling from Persia. He wanted to know what they knew, which star they were following, and what it meant for *his* kingdom if a new king was indeed born in Bethlehem. Herod wanted answers. So if we call them wise men, perhaps it is because a part of us also wants to know what is happening, what does it mean, and is it a threat to the things we've been clinging to for certainty and security?

Calling them *magi* isn't all that different from the translated, wise men. However, the foreign nature of the word helps us remember just how strange and unpredictable God's activity can be.

Sometimes, especially with the Christmas stories, we can familiarize ourselves with the characters, the locations, and the movements so much that even the most bizarre things seem totally normal. That's what happens here. We're used to the magi, we have been them, dressed up in costume in the Christmas pageants. We've carried their gifts and we have even learned how to spell the names of their gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh (ok, well maybe some of you have, I still rely on spell check). All of this is to say that keeping the word *magi* in its original language is a bit like the old slogan “Keep Austin Weird.” It is

¹ <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/2016/december/magi-wise-men-or-kings-its-complicated.html>

a reminder that these important visitors are outsiders. They are foreign astrologers who saw a star as a sign and felt a call to journey a great distance to see a child.

Most of us would call that crazy.

But in this case, crazy led them on a holy adventure, a sacred journey that started with a star and ended with an encounter with God. This crazy calling saved their lives, and the lives of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus himself.

And if God worked God's will out through these *magi* in this way, then what is to prevent God from working similarly through us?

Initially, things might seem weird. At times maybe even crazy, but I believe - and I believe the Bible supports it - that sometimes we can get so stuck in the way we think things ought to be, always were, and forever shall be... that we forget to keep seeking. We forget to keep pursuing God and the mystery of God's love unfolding in this world in all kinds of creative and new ways. We forget to keep Christmas weird because we have translated all of the words into more palatable and familiar terms. So if we call them magi, maybe we will remember that the presence of God, the wisdom of God, and the power of God often come through unfamiliar means. God is bigger than our wildest imagination and our most earnest searches for certainty. This is why God remains a holy mystery, and we remain as seekers, pilgrims on the journey, following stars and dreams and all kinds of crazy revelations - trusting that God is going to carry us faithfully from start to finish and reveal to us nuggets of wisdom, whole measures of grace, and an abundance of love - love that might even save a life or two along the way. ...*if* we keep seeking.

By: Rev. Sarah Are Speed

Blessed are you who turn your face up to the sky,
who open your arms to feel the wind,
who notice all the things that we should notice.
Blessed are you who are fluent in wonder
and familiar with awe.
Blessed are you who, even now, dream dreams,
who have not lost hope,
who swear the glass is still half-full.
Blessed are you who plant trees
and sing the harmony,
who tell the children how this world can be magic.
Blessed are you who
walk and seek
and turn over every stone,
pointing out all the corners and colors
that God lives in.
Blessed are you.
Amen.