

“Finding Our Way”  
January 8, 2023

Matthew 2:1-12

The Magi arrive from the East, asking: “Where is the child who has been born?”

They are a curious lot, these ancient astrologers. They search the skies looking for signs. They are not reluctant to stop and ask others for directions toward their destination.

Because of this, they serve as an especially good model for us as we move into this new year. Our task for this year is to find our way—to discover what rebuilding and renewing our congregation will require and to get on with that work. This not simple or easy.

But it starts with questions.

“Where is the child...?” the Magi ask. “For we have seen his star...”

Stars, it would seem, raise more questions than answers. The Magi remind us that at its richest the Christian life is not so much a life lived as though all the answers were given, but a life lived as though all our answers are only gateways into deeper levels of both questions and answers. The Christian life begins in wonder and ends in worship, which in a sense is an even more profound sense of wonder.

When we are at our best, our life together, then is filled with wonder and curiosity.

As 2023 begins, we find ourselves in a new place. People are still getting sick—and even dying—but it seems that we have come through the worst of the pandemic as a nation, a community, and a congregation. Now we are called to discern and discover the new things that we want to create and do as a congregation. Even more, we are called to discern and discover the new things that God is creating and doing among us, with us, and through us.

So let us ask questions like:

What causes this congregation, this community to thrive and prosper?

Can we put new and long-time members together—and what will happen if we do?

How do build a vibrant congregation?

Do we dare to speak the truth of our hearts to one another?

What will we look like if we fashion a church that lets our light shine?

What will it sound like if we make new melodies and attempt unfamiliar harmonies and sing a new song?

Finding our way is a group activity. And that’s why Congregationalists have always put so much stock in meetings of the Congregation—not just those formal, “called” meetings such as the one we will hold later this month, but also the myriad of ways and times that we gather together.

Here’s how one person put it: Christian people, members of the same church, must meet together often enough to know each other; often enough to know each other’s deep concerns, differences

in viewpoint, and special needs. You cannot achieve unanimity of spirit with someone with whom you have not talked and prayed . . . The trouble is, that for us Americans, the whole idea sounds like too much work. “Too busy,” “too slow,” “too inefficient” are our protests . . . And yet, it is busyness and desire for efficiency that so often kill the great movements of the Spirit. It is so easy to be too busy to know your neighbor, too busy to love people, and too busy to wait quietly before God.”<sup>1</sup>

The magi were not too busy to question, to journey together, to seek. As a result, they found that their questions were answered. The child was born in Bethlehem, they were told.

And as we ask our own questions, we can do so in the faith that, as the One born in Bethlehem would later say, those who seek shall find.

So along with our curiosity we need a type of courage—the courage to hold the new before us; the courage not only to honor the questions but also to honor the different answers that will arise among us as we talk and listen together. It takes courage to speak our truth, to hear the truth of others, and to stay together—to follow where the bright star of our common vision might lead us.

This coming year will be a time of rebuilding. I’ve said that before and I will no doubt say it several more times in the months ahead. We need to help all active members find meaningful ways to connect with one another and to be involved in the ministry and mission of our congregation. We need to reach out to members and friends who have been away for any of a number of reasons, so that they might find a renewed sense of belonging and purpose in our congregation. And we need to open ourselves to the changes in our life together that new members will make possible.

This will require finding new ways to talk openly and honestly with each other, new ways to meet together, and new ways to worship, pray, and learn together.

This will require—let me be honest about it—“more” from each of us and all of us as we rebuild and become God’s new creation in this place. This is the joyful task that is set before us.

And here’s the good news—or *more* good news. We are well-prepared for all of this. There is much that is in place for our rebuilding. Over the past decade we have renovated, repaired, and restored our church building so that it is in very good condition. Over the past decade our generosity has not only met the needs of our community and the wider world, it has allowed us to build a strong financial foundation that stands even during the current economic upheavals. Over the past decade we have developed significant programs of Christian education for people of all ages so that we are able to grow in faith, hope, and love. Over the past decade solid preaching and inspiring music have anchored our worship and brought people into our congregation. By God’s grace and strength, we are more than up to our call to rebuild.

The word *epiphany* often conjures up images of a flash of lightening and sudden shouts of “Eureka!” It brings to mind the idea of an “ah-ha” moment—an unexpected insight that comes out of the blue.

The story of the magi suggests something different—a slow, patient process, more like the gradual dawning of a new day than a light bulb being switched on.

Following a star takes time. It was a long way from the courts of Parthia to Herod’s palace. And it was, no doubt, a difficult journey. By the time the Magi arrived in Bethlehem they entered, not

the manger of carols and Christmas cards and popular imagination, but a house. Mary and Joseph had found the time to acquire better housing during the journey of the Magi.

Epiphany—finding our answers, finding our way—will come over time as we journey together.

Epiphany brings our Christmas celebrations to a conclusion. The angels have gone. The shepherds and the Magi have found their different ways home. But do this, would you? Read Matthew's story of the magi again sometime this week. Notice that God is never mentioned.

And that, too, tells us something about our way ahead and how we will find it. God is with us, yes. But God is with us “unobtrusively and ambiguously”<sup>2</sup> as one person put it. This is how God chooses to be with us—in a way beyond our deepest fears and our wildest hopes.

Let us go from here this morning with curiosity and courage.

And let us go from this place with the words of the prophet echoing in our ears. Let us go into the world holding the words of the prophet in our hearts, in our very souls: Arise! Shine! For your light has come.

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur Rouner, *The Congregational Way of Life*, pg. 57.

<sup>2</sup> Eugene Boring, Matthew, NIB, vol. 8, pg. 143.