

Sermon: 5 Lessons from the Magi for Our Pursuit of God**Scripture: Matthew 2:1-12****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: January 8, 2022**

Throughout the Advent and Christmas seasons we've talking about God coming to us, the prophet promising it, the people preparing for it, and then God's arrival in a manger on a silent night and holy night. Mary and Joseph, Elizabeth and Zechariah, Anna and Simeon, the shepherds, to all of them God came – in the form of an angel, in a dream, in bright light and song, God to them and we say here 2000 years later God in fact came to the whole world.

And the Christmas season ends here in the new year at the feast of Epiphany, which was officially Friday, January 6, but we are celebrating Epiphany today as a community with this service and a meal tonight in the Tucker Room and a walk through the darkened church to the manger. And it's good and right to end this way because at the end of the season of God's coming, we move into the new year and through Epiphany we remember that also we must GO TO GOD. Like the wise men who journeyed from Persia to Israel, it's now time for us to consider in this new year how if we want a healthy, strong, dynamic relationship with God, it's going to take some work on our part, it's going to take our pursuing it, it's going to take in many instances a journey, either an inward one or an outward one or a both-and but a willingness to journey towards God. And using the Matthew story of the magi as our guide I want to lift up 5 lessons from their journey to the Christ Child that might inform us in our own pursuit of God. So let's get to it!

First of all, what we quickly witness from this story for the sake of our own journeys is that Magi is plural for Magus. So it wasn't a magus that came from the East, a single wise man or member of the ancient Persian priestly caste, but it was a group of them, Magi! We don't know that there were 3 of them even though that's what our pageants and pictures always portray, only that there were three gifts that they brought, but according to Matthew, what we do know is that there were more than one of them. This is our first lesson that rubs against our individualistic culture, that if we are going to pursue God, we must do so together not alone. Good job being here this morning, that's a good start that you've come to worship God with this community. For it's not about or own individual heroic pursuit of spiritual enlightenment but a communal movement in that direction – where two or three are gathered, is what Jesus says. It's not "I One King of orient am" that would sound terrible. It's "We three kings of orient are"! The spiritual pursuit of God is necessarily a joint one and there are such benefits in that joint journey, not least of which is we are less likely to get lost. I have always liked the statement that they say in AA to encourage people to stay connected to one another – "your own head is a bad neighborhood that you don't want to be caught in alone." We are meant to pursue God together - Lesson One.

Lesson Two from the story of the Magi's journey to God is that it simply takes getting up and going in the first place and going out beyond our comfort zones, out of those places where we hold power and control and are too comfortable. We are in power and control in our own little Persias but the pursuit of God might very well and often does asks of us to go into Herod's territory, wherever that may be, where we not only hold less power but are at the mercy of the power of others, where we are foreigners, no longer totally safe, where we

are vulnerable. That's what the Magi did and in doing so you realize how important Lesson 1 is, that we don't do it alone but together. Lesson 2 – we push ourselves out of our comfort zones to find God.

Lesson 3 – if we are going to pursue God, we must be prepared and ready to admit that we not only can make mistakes along the way that we have to course correct for but that we are really adept at deceiving ourselves and being deceived by others. The deadly sin of pride lurks very very close to the pilgrim in pursuit of God. And so much trouble can be had and made from one who is not seriously diligent about their own capacity, tendency, penchant for self-deception and self-justification. Right there at the center of the story of the Magi is the tyrant Herod who tries to deceive the Magi into telling him where the infant is so that “he can go and worship him”. And the Magi you could even say deceived themselves by making their first stop the local authority asking them where the newborn King was to be found, like that was going to go over well? C'mon, wise peeps! And apparently they would have gone back to Herod had they not been warned in a dream not to go back there. Not very wise-sounding men were they?! We are not as wise as we believe ourselves to be and are more susceptible to deception than we know. Lesson 3 – be on guard for how easily the pursuit of God can become a pursuit of something else or something lesser or something opposite with our barely realizing it.

The Fourth Lesson from the Magi story is that the end or culmination of the journey, which is ideally God, Godself, is likely going to be surprising, something, someone, some reality that you did not expect, that breaks open your own reality... and the surprise likely will be that God's presence is in the small, meek, lowly, poor, everyday, average things that we are more likely to overlook than to

expect. See how the Magi went first to the king and the palaces to seek this babe born to be king and it took them a little while to accept that the star they were following was leading them not to glamorous Jerusalem but to a po-dunk Bethlehem! And in that po-dunk town not even into the nicest house there or even the best room in the house but rather to where the animals lay. Again, not such wise men... but can you blame them? As Paul put it – “the wisdom of this world is foolishness before God and God’s wisdom appears as foolishness.” The wisest of men and women are not above mistaking the wisdom of God for foolishness and we shouldn’t be either as we pursue God.

And the 5th and final lesson that I’ll lift up for us this morning is what must be done if and when we do finally get there and accept the surprise of where we find God. The end point is not about our own fulfillment and enlightenment and what we gain from the object of our journey and pursuit which is God, but rather it’s about what we give. The Magi arrive with gifts and though they might have been surprised to see this rando family in a barn among the animals as poor as dirt they bow down onto their knees and give him gifts. They don’t gain rather they give. Ah, there’s our wise men. It’s not about them and how they are and what they get, it’s about him and who God is and what they’ve given of themselves and what the world gets through God. Eventually, they get up off that ground having given their gifts and they return home praising God and knowing that something fundamental changed in the world and that was enough. That’s what they got - the opportunity to unload and give of themselves, for it wasn’t about them it was about God.

There are probably more but those are at least 5 lessons from the journey of the Magi to help our own pursuit of God – 1. It’s not supposed to be done

alone, 2. It requires getting out of our comfort zones, 3. We should be ever on the watch for our own tendency to deceive ourselves and others in the pursuit, 4. We should expect to have our expectations subverted and find God in the common not more than glorious, and finally, 5. It's not about what we gain its about what we can then give when we discover God.

And that journey, that pursuit and that giving, is quite simply what we are made for. So welcome to 2023 and welcome to the journey towards God here with First Congregational Church in Winchester. I am glad to have you as a fellow journeyman, journeyperson, with us.