

"Gifts of Another Way Home"
January 3, 2021; 10:00 am
Matthew 2:1-12
Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO
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The Visit of the Wise Men

2 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men^[a] from the East came to Jerusalem, ² asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising,^[b] and have come to pay him homage." ³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah^[c] was to be born. ⁵ They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶ 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd^[d] my people Israel.'"

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men^[e] and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸ Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." ⁹ When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising,^[f] until it stopped over

the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped,^[g] they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹ On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

I. PACKING

Have you ever packed for a journey? A bag, or three, a car, or maybe a camel? How do you know where to begin, when packing? Do you make a list—check it twice? Do you start by piling things in the doorway, on their way to the garage or driveway? Maybe you start weeks ahead, with *several* lists. Or, maybe that notion makes you crazy, and you're the "throw it in at the last minute" type.

Does packing give you "packing anxiety?" We joke about that at our house, because I am notorious for getting distracted while packing and forgetting something important. Or ending up with clothes or shoes that don't match.

I have to insist on "quiet time"—much like sermon-writing time—where no conversation happens and each person can focus on their packing without interacting!

When Rocky was a toddler, we had to be "stealth packers." We would try to bring out his favorite

binkies, companion animals and must-have toys and games, along with the strollers, car seats, diaper bags etc., and stack them in the living room.

He would be *upset* by this and, when we weren't looking, sneak his blankets, toys and stuffed animals, back into his room!

II. PACKING for a JOURNEY

Today, we are all packing for a journey of sorts. For today, we are at a pivotal moment—it's *still* Christmas Season in our church year and celebration, but soon it will be Epiphany.

And, in that pivotal moment we journey, *with* the wise ones of old. To the Christ child, still entering this world, coming to us, in a star-struck and profound way. We journey, *if* we are wise, following a star—even if unsure of our destination—but in hope and promise.

Are we not seekers, *longing* for something more in life—something deeply meaningful and worthy of our worship, our adoration and following?

These were not *kings*, though you might have heard that often in song or manger scene, but **magoi**—Wise Ones, Sages. Possibly astrologers—readers of the skies and watchers of sacred signs. They might not have all been men. For wise ones of all ages are of all kinds!

What do you think *they* thought as they packed their bags for the camels that magical night?

What does one take on a journey when one is not sure where one is going? When following a star—not knowing what exactly you're following and where it might all lead? What Presents do we take to find the Presence? Is there a 10 Essentials list?!

III. WHAT IS NEEDED AND WHAT IS NOT?

Someone asked a question on the airwaves this week that struck me and got me to pondering this question—"What do we *truly* need on this journey, and what should be put back and left behind?"

The query went out: "Something *light* for the end of the year: what's the one thing you bought that ended up being totally unusable this year? An example: TSA pre-checking for all the travel we ended up canceling."

An unending stream of responses followed. Some of them were comical—some very expensive and everything in between! Gym memberships, tickets for international travel, expensive concerts or ski passes, fancy new slacks for going to work. Doggy day care which became unnecessary when work-at-home commenced. Extra diapers for a child who then potty-trained as soon as COVID lock-down began!

What did we *think* we needed or wanted at the beginning of 2020, that we didn't need at all? Where are the *wants* in life that we *thought* were needs, that have now taken on far less importance or focus for us?

Perhaps we could learn a lot from all of that. And then, flip it over, and consider something from this past year that we *didn't* want or need and ended up receiving, that turned out to be a real *gift*.

For me, what immediately comes to mind, is how we've all been dragged, kicking and screaming, into learning the technology we resisted before, and now have a way to commune and worship together that we might have only dreamed of a year ago. Who woulda thunk that CUCC would have a YouTube channel?! And, be worshiping and singing together and sharing stories and baking cookies with loved ones all over the world?!

Who would have imagined that folks who have moved away geographically could be welcomed back into the Circle spiritually, and others be more easily invited, and our community thus thrive and grow?

Gifts for the journey certainly come in all shapes and sizes—sometime expected and sometimes not even imagined!

IV. GUIDANCE IN UNCERTAINTY

Today, we *also* begin a journey together here, as we explore several weeks in song and message: **“Where is God when life gets hard?”**

We will look at the “presents”—the Gifts—sometimes unexpected—that come to us in life, or we find ourselves in the midst of—that lead us to the *Presence*—a deepening of our relationship with God.

We'll start today, along with the Magi packing and following an unknown Star, with exploring the gift of “uncertainty.” Other gifts along the way are “getting lost,” “being thunderstruck,” “temptation,” “becoming a misfit.” I think I'm really gonna like that last one!

A friend of mine, Rev. Eric Elnes, has written a wonderful guidebook: *“Gifts of the Dark Wood: Seven Blessings for Soulful Skeptics and other wanderers.”*

The Dark Wood is *not* a dark place, but a *liminal* space full of rich opportunities to grow, stretch, ponder anew what life shows us and how God is There, exploring with us and teaching us always. Always more to learn about love and life in God.

V. GIFTS FOR THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

So, today, as we consider the Magi story for our times, we see that they are not that different from us. Maybe from a different land, different religion and culture, different color of skin and background, but at the core—they are *seekers*—looking for something to believe in, to worship, to guide their lives.

This is *not* a year for New Year's Resolutions but a whole different way to reflect on the year past and the year to come. This year has shown us that life needs to be lived differently if nothing else.

I issue a challenge—to myself and to each of us—to think of *three* gifts to bring to the baby Jesus today; to bring to our spiritual lives and walk with God this

year that are practical but meaningful.

And, like Rocky, what treasures are better snuck back into the bedroom and left behind—whether intentionally or not?!

VI. HOME BY ANOTHER WAY

For, in this not a “business as usual year,” the usual gifts and offerings might just not fit. Remember, The Wise Ones went “Home by another way”—when they learned of peril and danger—not just to themselves, but to innocent ones as well.

What might the Gifts of Another Way home be for us this year?

a) Gold

For the Magi, Gold was a rare, hard-to-come by treasure. Not something they would have mined in their back yard or up the creek nearby. It would have come via trade routes, so they would have had to exchange something else of value to them. We have no idea how *much* gold they brought to the Christ Child, but I like to think it was significant.

As we ask ourselves what is “most valuable” to us, in our lives, what else comes to mind but the loved ones who surround us. What is your #1 Gold in life? For some of us that would include 2 AND 4-leggeds, of course. When asked how they survived and thrived in this year of COVID and quarantine, so many people declared: a greater closeness to family—as crazy-making as that might be at times! More meaningful

connecting with other humans far and near. And, the companionship of pets, who got us through. Made us love and laugh and live it up in spite of the challenges. Who were quite *happy* we were stuck at home with them and not always leaving them lonely!

Richard Wagamese (Ojibway author), gives us a gift and a challenge—of how we treasure the gift of people and creatures in our lives, as we go forward into this new year:

“In the end the gift is people. You unwrap them slowly over time and they reveal themselves degree by degree, detail by detail until what you finally hold in the palm of your hand and your heart, is their essence, their spirit – and this is what fills you, what becomes you.

Everything you do with them, each step forward, is another entrance you make together, another act of becoming. So that as Christmas fades, you and your world are populated. You are known, seen, recognized and every reaching out is rewarded by the feel of Spirit around you, within you, resonating in the physical shape of friends... Thanks for the gift of you, all of you!!”

b) Frankincense

For the ancient Near Easterners, Frankincense was a rare and hard-to come by sweetener of life. It is a resin that comes from a tree, but it takes that tree 8 to 10 *years* before it *starts* to produce the resin.

These trees are hardy enough to survive great storms and to seemingly grow out of solid rock, but they are also quite delicate (the bark has the texture of paper, making it fragile and easy to remove). Therefore, all the collecting must be done by hand. Not only that, but the quality of the resin extracted (individual hardened chunks of which are called tears) must be hand inspected before being deemed of suitable quality to be sold.

Hmm...that sounds like another of the great gifts that has come to be highly valued, as we transition from last year into this: Patience and Resilience!

We have had to grow patiently, producing the treasures within, and tending gently to one another and our own souls, giving just enough light and sun and fresh air. Just enough gentle, hand-holding, tending and inspecting to bring to fruition the rich resins and growth that we seek.

For me, one challenging gift of this year has also been a great awakening and needed reminder to “lie down in green pastures” and be patient, paced and companioned on the journey. I thought I would just breeze through foot surgery, be back on my scooter in no time and putzing around, celebrating the seasons and launching with energy and vitality into the new year.

Well, life has other things and different paces in mind sometimes. When 12 days out the previously-managed pain and nausea came on with a vengeance and

couldn't be solved with the usual measures, I had to surrender. “Uncle!” I cried. Okay, God, I am in over my head. I cannot just get back on the horse, or the camel, and continue the journey. I need some pacing. A *lot* of pacing! To lower my own expectations—of my physical, emotional and spiritual self all at once.

Resilience will come. Weeping and pain through the night *will* turn to joy in the morning—eventually. But, it takes Patience too—patience like I have rarely had to practice in my life. Well, except for childbirth! Clarke says I've been a good patient. And he's been an amazing caregiver. But, I'm not sure I'm a believer—yet!

And, I will need help from companions on the journey in ways I have not had to ask before. You all—my community and family—have been there in countless ways, and continue—thank you! I am grateful beyond words.

What is your Frankincense gift for this time? What rare and hard-to-come by resin does your soul need at the threshold of this year?

If not Patience and Resilience, then perhaps another Fruit of the Spirit?
love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

c) Myrrh

Myrrh. Also a resin, hard to come by in the time of the Magi. Used for embalming at the time of death, but

also for anointing a sacred or royal ruler or symbol. A reminder that death and life truly are all wrapped into one—part of each other, in the life of the Spirit. Anointing with Myrrh is to declare something sacred. Special, set apart. A sacrament.

So, for our Myrrh Gift today, we come to the Table. And we commit to continuing to come to the Table, the Divine Presence in our midst, throughout the year. Inviting others as we come. Who, can we invite to our Table this year? Our loving, lavishly welcoming Table where there is a place for all? Even if it's on Zoom!

WHAT CAN I BRING?

What's in your pack? What is essential for you on this journey, into new year? What are the Gifts of another way home, that you bring to this day? To this time in our communal life together?

What can I give him?
Poor as I am
If I were a shepherd
I would give a lamb
If I were a wise man
I would do my part
But what I can, I give him
Give my heart
Give my heart

May it be so with us. Amen.

WELCOME TO WORSHIP:

Sunday, January 3, 2020

THRESHOLD—Celtic notion

Picture—mountain behind.

We are at a threshold moment, as we turn the calendar to a new year: 2020-2021. The church seasons from Advent and Christmas into Epiphany—the season of Light and awakenings to God’s presence in surprising and profound ways.

This image—right in our own town, of a threshold of sorts—an arch of river rock, looking through to the mountain in the distance—strikes me as just the right picture to focus our minds on as we move forward into the journey together. As a community, as the People of God in this place and time.

This arch has been in Buena Vista since 1936. Has anyone ever taken a picture of it from the perspective of looking *through* it at the mountain? Looking at the same old things from a new perspective is one of the gifts of this time from our creative Creator.

(And a reminder to pray for Mike Wells, one of our church family who took this photograph, and is sick with bronchitis and pneumonia.)

Where is God when life gets hard? Here, present, beckoning, calling us. As the Star guides the wise ones to the Christ Child—over and over again—God guides us too—if we pay attention.

“I look to the mountains,” the psalmist sings. Where does my help come from? From the One who makes the mountains and inhabits every place on earth and calls to us.

At this threshold, we keep looking up, through, toward. So, step into and through the doorway that is this liminal time of change with hope, faith and love. Courage to keep the mountain in mind—not to be conquered, but to be climbed—in body and spirit—with love for God and one another.