



The Practice of Wonder

TEXT
Matthew 2:1-15

January 6, 2019 — Sermon by Rev. Hallie Hottle

So it's the last day of our Christmas season. This time of year, with decorations begging to be put away, always makes me reflect on Christmases gone by.

I'm lucky. I have mostly *good* memories of this season. There are plenty of things my family didn't do well. But Christmas ... we were pretty *great* at Christmas. We did it all: drove to the tree farm and cut down a tree every year, a farm complete with alpacas who wandered the property while we found a tree inevitably too big. Christmas music played in our house non-stop. And my mom, who was the worst cook of all time, would become the world's best baker, spending the days making stockpiles of cookies.

It was typical for friends to come over to see the reindeer prints that would appear on our roof if it was snowy that Christmas. And on Christmas night, we would all pile into our grandparents' house — cousins, aunts, uncles and pets. We'd spend the night singing, led by my grandpa, who spent his young adult years leading a country music band.

In hindsight, it was there at my grandparents' house that the real magic happened.

My grandparents are *fascinating* people. My grandpa didn't graduate high school — not because he was home working on the farm like lots of folks in my farming town, but because he was just, well, he got kicked out. They chased country music to Nashville — not the Rascal Flatts/Dixie Chicks kind of country, the outlaw kind of country. My grandpa played with Johnny Cash and raised us to know our way around a shotgun, swear like sailors and question authorities.

I think in part, it's because of the creativity required to constantly argue your way out of trouble, and in part the ingenuity that poverty breeds. But my grandparents have always been, and continue to be, some of the greatest storytellers you've ever met. And in the Christmas season, that's when their creativity really shined.

One year, my grandma introduced us to "reindeer bait," and we ran through the snow sprinkling glitter mixed with frosted flakes all over the yard as she pointed to the sky, screaming, "Here they come!"

My grandpa fashioned himself into a carpenter, and whatever we wanted for Christmas, he would find a way to make. But everything he made came

with a story. The dollhouse he made out of a tree stump was an exact replica of the tree he lived in when he was young and raised by wolves. The bass guitar he created from a metal bucket, some rope and wood — well, Elvis taught him how to do it. His stories are a mix of tall tale, with enough wild truth mixed in that you can never entirely discount them.

And one year, I was probably 10 or 11, my grandparents gifted my sister and I with this ornate wooden box that contained three items in a small cloth bag: a piece of gold (really the sparkly iron pyrite), a chunk of frankincense and a vile of myrrh oil. Naturally, it came with a story — this one about how my grandpa traded a guitar to acquire it from descendants of the wise men. We didn't really believe him, but with the gold and frankincense and myrrh right there, smelling up our hands, smelling up our house, it was *impossible* for our imaginations to not run wild.

The farther I get from the reindeer bait, the more grateful I am for memories of Christmas that are a mix of myth and reality. And the longer I find myself on this side of the story, charged to teach it with all its theological intricacies, I'm more certain that's

what it's about. Our Christmas season comes to us as an invitation to practice *wonder*, daring us to imagine, again and again.

The birth of our God as baby Savior is recounted and collected in a way that requires us to enter into it with eyes wide and hearts willing to wonder; to let go of desire for tested truth and let ourselves play with it; to smell it, as much as we know it; to imagine, as often as we read.

So we've spent this Advent Season with each of our gospel writers, remembering what they wrote, or didn't, about this story. We've "imagined" what it would be like to go to each of the houses of these authors who likely would not have had houses. It's been a journey of wondering, of imagining, of letting go of some questions and, hopefully, discovering some new ones.

Now we're at the end of this season. And we end the season every year with a day dedicated to our most illusive story — this story with the characters that have invited the most wondering, the subjects of artistic interpretation and speculation through centuries: *the Magi*.

We call this day *Epiphany*, and it falls every year on January 6, 12 days after Christmas. The western church adopted this as a feast day in the fourth century; and Christians around the world, of every denomination, celebrate it in different ways. It's almost always celebrated with food, and often with gift-giving.

Some Christians mark this day by marking the doors of their houses with chalk. They write the year, along with the letters

C, M and B, letters representing the Latin phrase "May Christ bless this house" — and also representing the three names history has made up for the Magi: Casper, Melchior and Balthasar. It's a prayer for blessing for the new year — both for those who live in the house, and for all who journey to "visit."

Some traditions exchange "star words," which we've done here before and are doing again. Letting a star "summon" you, with a word that you'll meditate on this new year.

It's not an accident that every year, this season ends with this day that greets us with fantastical story and strange tradition. We don't always practice these things here, but this year we are — because this year, in this time and place, we have no shortage of serious things to occupy our days and worry our minds.

Our government is "shut down," while those who must work for her continue to work. We're confining children in jails, while we argue about walls. We're patting ourselves on the back for electing the most diverse class of Congress' history, as we backslide into talking more about a young congresswoman's lipstick (which is fabulous) than we do her intellect (which is why she's there).

This past year, we decided it was more important to take sides than to see each other, locking ourselves into lonely stalemates, making progress impossible. So this year, we're doing all the weird things and remembering this fantastical story — because our fourth century ancestors,

and siblings around the world, and my grandfather, they know we need to practice; we need some help wondering; we need to touch the stars and smell in frankincense. We need enough imagination to create some new ways home.

So we call them Magi ... wise men ... from the East. Matthew calls them *Magoi*. We don't know what that means. That's where the wonder begins.

The word is used later in scripture to mean "magicians." It's used elsewhere during this time to refer to a Persian priestly caste, the Zoroastrians. Nevertheless, based on the context of the story, they're probably more like astrologers, people who are watching the sky, interpreting celestial events. They believe *this* star means a child has been born — specifically, the "king of the Jews." So they go to where they'd expect to find answers about such a thing.

They're not Jews themselves — hence, their travel; hence, their inquiry with King Herod, the ruler in charge of the Jews, on behalf of the Roman Empire. King Herod doesn't know the answer to their question. He's "frightened," it says. *Old kings never rejoice at news of new rulers*. So he summons the chief priests and scribes and asks them for information. They study. They consult the scriptures and return with the answer: Bethlehem.

So the Magi set off, continuing their journey ... *alone*.

This part always makes me wonder. The chief priests and the scribes? The ones the king just consulted to learn the Mes-

siah's place of birth? Why don't they travel with the Magi? Were they afraid, like the king? Were they unwilling to venture on with these foreign travelers? Did they not trust the scriptures they just interpreted? Are they not curious enough to know why the king has asked? Where are the people charged with understanding and interpreting the ancient holy writings, when God entered into human history?

The story continues. And the star stops over the place the child has been born, which is weird, and impossible, and indicative of just what has happened here, that even the stars don't obey the laws of the physical world. They reach the house, see Mary and the child, and they kneel and pay him homage.

No wondering or interpretation is needed here, at this most important part of the story. These Gentile, non-Jewish seekers, their first act upon seeing this infant is to *worship*. They have gifts. Those come next. They give the gold, frankincense and myrrh — gifts with no limits of wondering why and how and what they mean — smelly gifts, gifts fit for a holy king. And then they leave.

At some point, they've had a dream, warning them not to return to King Herod. So they leave the baby Jesus and travel back to their own country — avoiding the king, it says, by going home "another way." And that's it. That's all we have of this story that has drawn artists and academics and children and grandfathers to write and create and wonder for centuries.

So we've made up names for the Magi and practiced putting chalk on our doors. We exchange gifts and eat food and share "star words." We turn the travelers into royalty and decorate their crowns with jewels and their lives with extravagant backstories. We've sprinkled tall-tale into the already fantastical story.

And I think that's the point. I think that's *entirely* the point. I think our season ends with this story because restless imaginations are God's desire. The birth of God in human flesh is an invitation for us to imagine the impossible. It's as if the Spirit wedged herself right into the gospel words and made space, that the young might believe, and the old might weave possibilities to be believed in.

The glitter in the yard and the glass balls on the ceiling aren't frivolous extras of the season. These are the important parts. Our ability to wonder matters as deeply as our theological convictions. Our practice of *awe*, our desire to wade into the *impossible*, to *imagine the unimaginable* — that's what God rejoices in.

Foreign astrologers with expensive gifts, and no knowledge of the Jewish scriptures, met the Messiah as he was born. They trusted their dreams over a tyrant's authority and took a different way home. In doing so, they bought some time for the holy family to cross a national border for protection, while the king slaughtered children to protect his power.

It's not a story we were meant to read yearly, to rehearse

and remember by rote. It's a story we're meant to enter into, to walk around in, to wonder and imagine and play. It's a story written by our God, who knows that power is always terrified of new power. Tyranny stops at no cost to preserve tyranny. And we can and should look to scripture. We should study and research and look to experts. But it will be the strangers, those who trust in dreams and gaze at stars, who blaze the new ways that will lead us home.

What if new ways forward that we need to find this year are wrapped in glitter and laying out in the yard, waiting for us to imagine, to play, to create plot lines that are a mix of fantasy and reality and dare to believe they could be true?

But what if the priests and the scribes aren't going to get us there? What if all we've done before points us in the right direction ... and no farther? Who are the seekers? Who will trust dreams and chase stars and deny tyrants and create new paths?

What if what is needed of us in this new year is imaginative thinking, playful willingness to experiment? Can we do it? Have we practiced? Are we brave enough, bold enough, convicted enough to find our way to the Holy and back again?

Nick and I spent this Christmas with my family. And my grandpa wasted no time in telling us he got our infant nephew a surprise gift. The kid is 6 months old, and my grandpa said he got him a horse — just a little one. It was out in the shed, and he couldn't show us, not yet. We

knew he was kidding. But when he later ventured out into the cold, with a plate of carrots to feed the thing, I admit, I wondered.

The next day he waltzed in with a smirk and a *rocking horse*, too big for the baby, but fully humored by our wondering.

My grandpa doesn't have the solutions to our most serious problems. But his unceasing imagination, curated from a lifetime on the margins of a society he wasn't sure he belonged in, I know it's made some space in me to wonder. In a way, he has done what our story has been begging us to do for over 2,019 years: pushing us to consider the stars, imagine who Magoi might be, teaching us to employ a little outlaw theology, with the tyrannical forces of our day.

So we're beginning this new year by practicing Epiphany — practicing some strange traditions to stir up the mystery-embracing parts of ourselves.

So friends, on this last day of our Christmas season, on this first Sunday of this new year, go home and chalk your doors. Take a star and imagine. Eat together and tell some stories, real or make-believe. Allow yourself to wonder. For our God is the God who does impossible things. I wonder what those might be this year.

Let us pray: So God of skies that stand still and God of every new day, root our hearts in your dreams. Lift our eyes to your stars. Wrap us in your boldness, that we might dare to walk the ways you imagine, in this new year. Amen.



This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.