

THE POWER OF A PERSONAL ENCOUNTER OR GET ON YOUR CAMEL AND RIDE

Again...good evening/morning welcome to worship at the First United Methodist Church. My name is Susan Tait, and I am a wife, a mother, a grandmother, an artist, a ski instructor and, today, a magpie. Paul was once called a magpie or a seed picker. I certainly do not consider myself in his league but will share in the definition of magpie. Magpie: a collector of unrelated tidbits. This day I will share a few tidbits I have collected and do my best to make them relate.

I think this is the place where you tell a clever story or a joke. Here it is...Do you know why they hang mistletoe in airports? So you can kiss your luggage goodbye.

Well, if you did some flying this holiday and you made it and your luggage made it or if your guests are gone and you can have a nap this afternoon... Congratulations...you have almost survived the holidays. Holidays...from the word holy days....How sad that we have made it so complicated that we are thrilled to “survive” rather than “experience.”

These past weeks of Advent, Pastor Jeff has helped us “experience” Christ in the Christmas story. You will remember we did not just revisit the prophecies and the events leading up to the nativity but we looked at the story through the eyes of those who had a personal interest in seeking the Messiah or had a personal encounter with the child and the family. From murderous King Herod, whose fear and insecurity led him to want to destroy the child; to Simeon and Anna, the pictures of faith, who recognized and blessed the child; to the shepherds, the angels and, of course, the Magi. This morning. We will continue to experience the story through the eyes of the Magi and what their presence and their presents meant to the early followers of Jesus and what their journey might mean for us today. At this time I invite you to take out your message notes and meditation moments. Maybe, you will want to remember a tidbit or two.

Many of you know that I have had the privilege of speaking here before and I have also facilitated a few small groups and Bible study classes. Sometime ago, someone asked me about my interest in the Bible. I think my answer was a surprise. I said I had grown up in the Protestant tradition, studied some religious stuff in college but my real interest and love of the Bible and “religious” study came about because of Santa Claus. As a fiber artist, I began making old world Santa figures, a few years ago. I call them Gift Bringers. Early on, I was often asked to make something special. “Can you make me a Pelsnichol?” “Can you make me a Papa Noel?” As a result, I began to research the origins of the different Santa designs and costumes and I developed a program on the history of the Santa figure and gift giving...but that’s for another day. Also, during my research I discovered the origin of the December 25th date and its significance and influence on our holiday customs but that is for another day also. I found early church writings with

concerns over gift giving and how the “Feast of the Nativity” should and should not be celebrated. Through all of this, one question kept coming to mind. Why don’t we give gifts in the name of the Three Wise Men? After all, weren’t they the first gift bringers? Fair enough question...let’s try to find some tidbits that might answer it.

So let’s begin with the Who, What, Where, When, How, Why? Pastor Jeff preached on the “Gifts of the Magi” a few weeks ago so some of this will be familiar.

SLIDE: WHO?

All we have from scripture comes from the book of Matthew, chapter 2 verses 1-2.

SLIDE: SCRIPTURE

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising and have come to pay him homage.”

So who were these wise men? In the New Oxford Annotated Bible, the wise men are identified as Magi. Magi is the plural of the Latin Magus or the Greek Magos. In other early writings, the wise men are also referred to as August ... August gentlemen. As we know, all are names given to a priestly cast of ancient Persians.

SLIDE: WHAT?

What did they believe?

The Magi are believed to be followers of the prophet Zoroaster. Zoroaster lived in approximately the 10th to 11th centuries BC and his teaching focused on man’s struggle between what is true and what is lie. He taught his followers to be seekers of truth. Additionally, the wise men or Magi would have been philosophers, servants of god, and advisers to the kings, astronomers and astrologers. They would have known of the Jewish prophecy of a coming Messiah having been exposed to these ideas from the time of the Israelite captivity in Babylon.

What did they look like? We all know.

SLIDE....kids as kings

And if you wonder about the angels

SLIDE...kids as angels

....and the shepherds and sheep.

SLIDE...kids as sheep

But back to the wise men....Here is one of the first known depictions of the Magi from a mosaic in a church in Ravenna, Italy.

SLIDE...Ravenna mosaic

It is from about 560 AD and shows the visitors wearing eastern dress (Persian) and Phrygian caps. A soft conical cap with the top pulled forward. It is a style associated with freedom and liberty which originated in central Anatolia (Turkey). Similar caps were worn by the French throughout their revolutionary history. Known as the liberty cap it is incorporated into several US states flags and the seal of the US Senate. Should we make something of this connection with liberty and freedom in this mosaic? Probably, not. It tells us these men came from somewhere east of Constantinople and were not kings.

SLIDE: St Joan of Arc...stone work picture

If you cannot quite picture this cap here is another depiction or ...think of the smurfs.

SLIDE: WHERE?

Where did they come from?

The scriptures say they came from the east, a rather relative term. How many of you may remember an older family member saying something like "Those crazy people from out east are ruining our area?" They may have meant folks from Pagosa Springs. Or Kansas....anyway, scholars today believe the Magi came from some part of Persia. A journey of about 1000 miles.

SLIDE: When?

When did they come?

Later in Matthew we read, "*On entering the house, they (the Magi) saw the child with Mary, his mother, and they knelt down and paid him homage.*"

Since the writer mentions a house and not a manger, many believe that the Magi arrived much later and perhaps Jesus was a toddler. Artists, commissioned by the church have depicted the scene both ways. Here we are at the manger.

SLIDE...manger nativity

And here we see the Magi at a house.

SLIDE...house nativity

SLIDE: HOW?

How many were there?

Wise Men...plural in Matthew. More than one. In the Eastern Church it is believed there were 12. We depict three because they gave three gifts.

SLIDE: Many Magi

Again, an artist rendition showing many travelers which seems quite likely for such a long journey.

And of course, we **how** did they find their way....by following the star.

SLIDE: comet ison

There was much said about the comet ison last month. I read recently that it burned out behind the sun. It certainly did not live up to its expectation as the greatest and brightest sighting in decades. David Levy, a comet specialist says, "comets are like cats. They have a tail and they do precisely what they want."

Much has been written about the star of Bethlehem. Was it a comet?

SLIDE: comet

Many scenes depict a comet. Pastor Jeff reminded us that around 6-7 BC...the time of Herod, there was a conjunction of Jupiter, the star of royalty, and Saturn, the protecting star of Israel. This would have created a very bright light in the constellation of Pisces, the sign of the Messiah. Again this conjunction of the planets is mentioned in the Jewish prophecy familiar to the Magi. Comet? Conjunction of the planets? Who knows. So for today, let's say the Magi clearly saw something. It was compelling and they followed it, seeking the truth and justice promised by the Jewish Messiah.

So about now you are saying...this is nice...some of it we've heard before. Nice tidbits of information but we have still not answered the question about giving gifts in the name of the Magi. And what about "We Three Kings of Orient Are?"

Earlier, I mentioned that Magi is from the Latin Magus and Greek Magos. Besides meaning a priestly caste from Persia, the term can also refer to occult powers, magicians and charlatans. From these root words we also get the word magic. We find references to this in the Book of Acts. So by 500 AD, to be clear that these men were not of the occult, the church fathers had declared the Wise Men mentioned in the Gospel of Matthew to be kings based on the prophecy in Psalms and Isaiah.

SLIDE: all on one

PSALM 72:11 "MAY ALL KINGS FALL DOWN BEFORE HIM, ALL NATIONS GIVE HIM SERVICE."

PSALM 68:29 "BECAUSE OF YOUR TEMPLE AT JERUSALEM KINGS BEAR GIFTS TO YOU."

ISAIAH 60:3 "NATIONS SHALL COME TO YOUR LIGHT, AND KINGS TO THE BRIGHTNESS OF YOUR DAWN."

This distinction and depiction remained until the reformation.

SLIDE: magi as kings

Most of what we think we know about the Magi can be found in the song "We Three Kings of Orient Are" written in 1857. The words are based loosely on the works of St. Bede the Venerable writing around 700 AD. St. Bede was a prolific writer of church history,

doctrine and interpretation. He did not make things up but recorded legends already told. Bede records this legend. One of the Magi was named Melchior. He was the oldest and had a long white beard. He was the ruler of Persia/Arabia and brought the gift of gold which symbolized royalty. He was perhaps the leader of the group. In the movie, The Nativity, there is a funny scene between the three where the others fuss about how many times they have followed Melchior on his search for the Messiah and other assorted wild goose chases.

St Bede continues: the youngest was Gaspar. He was the ruler of Tarsus, Paul's area. He had a ruddy complexion and no beard. He brought the gift of frankincense which symbolized deity or priesthood. Frankincense is the incense used in the burners you see in formal services.

The third was Balthazar. He was the ruler of Sheba (now Yemen) or Ethiopia. He was more middle aged with a dark complexion and a black beard. He brought the gift of myrrh which symbolized healing, death and martyrdom. Myrrh is an ointment used medicinally and for embalming. Remember the faces in the Ravenna mosaic from 560 AD.

The story continues to say that Mary gave the linens she had wrapped the child in to the visitors. The Bible tells us that the Magi were warned not to return to Herod when they left. And in this legend, St Bede writes that they renounced their kingships, gave everything to the poor and went to preach the Gospel. 40 years later, they met St. Thomas in Indian. They were baptized, ordained and martyred and shared a common grave. Their remains were found by the Empress Helena, Constantine's mother, and taken to St. Sophia's in Constantinople, a church being built by Constantine's son.

SLIDE: Hagia Sophia

St. Sophia's is now Hagia Sophia Mosque/museum in Constantinople which is of course, now Istanbul. During the first crusade these remains were taken to Milan and in 1100, Frederick I of Germany, known as Barbarossa, took these remains to Cologne where they rest today.

SLIDE: Cologne remains

This sarcophagi was finished in 1225. When it was opened in 1864, it contained three sets of bones clearly of men ...one young, one middle aged and one of old age.

Not everyone agrees with this account. Marco Polo wrote in 1270 that he saw the remains of the Three Kings in a tomb south of Tehran. He was told an interesting and somewhat similar story about these men.

Enough tidbits. So, why don't we give gifts in the name of the Magi? It is true that in Spain, where it is believed the Magi passed through on their way to Bethlehem (for stargazers they were not very good navigators - no GPS), children write letters to the three

wise men and receive gifts the night before Epiphany. Epiphany being January 6 and the traditional date of the visit. But for most of the globe, gifts are the area of Santa Claus.

You see, the gifts of the Magi were not gifts like we give to one another. As Pastor Jeff mentioned, Melchior did not turn to Gaspar and say.... “Hey, what did you get me for Christmas?” These gifts were religious symbols and the early church used them and the Magi, too, to define Jesus and Christianity. Most people could not read and the art commissioned by the church served as the word. We may disagree with the amount of money spent on altar pieces, large canvases and murals but without these we would not have such an understanding of the rich tradition surrounding the Wise Men or, for that matter, the traditions surrounding many other teachings, as well.

SLIDE: Magi on animals

For the church and the people who worshipped Jesus, the wise men represented many things. For instance, they represented the continents - Europe, Asia and Africa.

SLIDE: magi all races and ages

They represented white skin, Asian skin and black skin. They represented other cultures and religions. Remember The Magi were not Jews. They represented young, old and middle aged. They represented kings who realized that the only thing worth true worship was Jesus.

SLIDE: dome nativity

They gave economic diversity to the nativity scene....rich and poor and middle class. Kings, shepherds and merchants. The church is saying that the message of the nativity is for everyone.

And the gifts of the Magi defined Jesus. Gold for royalty, frankincense for divinity and myrrh for healing and death. Jesus was king above all earthly kings, son of God whose death and resurrection healed a broken world.

Today, we can ask ourselves this question. Do we have a vision like the Magi? Of course, not all visions are the same. Paul had a vision on the Damascus road. Not everyone with him heard or saw the same thing. John the Baptist, with Jesus in the Jordan River, had a vision of a dove. Did everyone with him hear or see the same thing? Do you have a vision? Do we, as followers of Jesus, have a vision? If so, are you, are we willing to follow? It doesn't have to be the “kick you over” kind like Paul. But do we see something that needs to be done and have an idea of how to accomplish it?

SLIDE trust, motivation, and effort

It has been suggested that the trust, motivation and effort shown by the Magi are more

meaningful than the gifts. They trusted the vision, were motivated to search for truth and were willing to travel a long way. Even when they had no idea what they would find. Are we?

But I also am convicted by what happened next.

Matthew writes: *“And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.”*

SLIDE: “Having come to know Jesus, we are forbidden to return by the way we came.”

Gregory the Great put it this way: “Having come to know Jesus, we are forbidden to return by the way we came.”

SLIDE Ravenna mosaic

Like the Magi, when we encounter Jesus, we should be transformed and headed in a new direction. It doesn't say the Magi didn't go home. They just went a different way. The “Way” of Jesus. As we come to a new year, we are not asked to abandon the old year. We may have a new vision or we may simply have new energy for an old one. But like the Magi, we are challenged to trust and to keep on trusting during what may be very long journeys. We are challenged to examine our motives...are we seeking truth and justice. We are challenged to examine our effort...are we “keeping on” even when we aren't sure what is next. Secure in the promises of God. And as an aside, we are challenged to examine our giving. Are the gifts of our material wealth, or personal presence and service reflecting the love of the one who received the first gifts? And like Melchior, maybe we need to drag a few folks along with us.

I don't know about you but I would love to see myself as a Magi. A visionary, a seeker of truth, trusting the promises of God and prepared for a long journey...with maybe a few pretty robes and just a little crown.

SLIDE: camel

But in reality, I think I am called to be the camel. Camels are not very comfortable and they are not very cute. But camels can carry a big load and go a long way. The root word for camel means to carry and the Hebrew word for camel refers to going without food or water, sacrificing a bit, and having a great ability to be of service. In the children's song, “The Friendly Beasts”, about all the animals at the nativity, remember the donkey sings this most familiar verse...

I said the donkey shaggy and brown

I carried his mother up hill and down

I carried her safely to Bethlehem town

I said the donkey shaggy and brown

but the camel also sings...

I said the camel yellow and black

Over the desert upon my back

I brought him a gift in the wise men's pack

I said the camel yellow and black

Even the Three Wise Men needed a support team. We are also challenged to be that team. For many of us our greatest role will be being that camel. Carrying a load for someone. Walking along side of someone on a long journey. Making a few sacrifices and being of service. And no spitting.

It has been my privilege to offer these tidbits this day and to wrap up this Advent sermon series. But *Wrap up* is just not the right expression for this. We should not be wrapping up the holy-days just as we should not be sighing "wow, I survived" the holidays. We do not rewrap our Christmas gifts, replace the bow and card and put them in the closet until next year. The coming of the light and truth into the world is the greatest of gifts. Maybe we should keep the nativity scene out all year to remind us that the encounter with Jesus is for everyone and is about experience and transformation and a new way home. I pray that our new year's resolutions for 2014 will be about trust, motivation, effort and new roads to travel just like the Three Wise Men and the camels.

Let us pray.

Dear God, we thank you for the experience of the Nativity. We thank you for the encounters with those who were part of the story and for our own encounter with Christ in Christmas. May we continue to seek after the light and live transformed lives filled with love. May we be like the Magi not afraid to get on our camels and ride. And also like the camels willing to carry the gifts and to be of service.

In your holy name, Amen

“Get On Your Camel and Ride”

Theme: Seeking Christ in Christmas

Scripture: *Matthew 2:1-2, 12*

Things I'd like to remember from today's sermon:

[illegible]

Random thoughts for New Year Resolutions

Matthew 5:21-24 - Jesus is asking us to see beyond the letter of the law. Is there someone you are angry with? Someone who is angry with you? Think about how you can begin the New Year by reconciling with this person.

Matthew 25:35-40 - Jesus is asking us to see his face in all people....the poor and vulnerable, the lost, the least and the last. How are you doing? Is there a place you can serve this coming year? How have you been helped in the past?

Luke 10:27 - Jesus is giving us the greatest commandment. This coming year, how can you better love your God with all your heart? Your soul? Your strength? Your mind? And now the really hard part...love your neighbor as yourself? Think about all the things you do for yourself. How do they

relate to serving your neighbor? Resolve to love bigger and better.

1 Corinthians 12:4-6 - Paul is teaching about spiritual gifts. Have you taken the spiritual gifts inventory? You can find it on the FUMC web page- www.fumcdurango.org. Resolve to take time to consider your gifts and how you might use them to love God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind and how your gifts can be a blessing to others.

Amos 5:24 - The prophet Amos instructs the people that the Lord is not interested in festivals and sacrifices but in justice and righteousness. Resolve to better measure your efforts, motives and actions in terms of justice and righteousness; less show and more go.

Micah 6:8 - Like Amos, the prophet Micah reminds people of the true requirements of the covenant with God. Resolve in 2014 to let justice, kindness and humility be your guide.

This all sounds pretty simple but in reality it goes against most of human nature. Resolve in 2014 to practice a life that includes constant communication. Communication with God that includes a prayer life that strengthens understanding and direction. Resolve to pray boldly. Communication with family that strengthens bonds of love and trust. Resolve to have more meals together, more family activities. Communication with co-workers that strengthens cooperative relationships. Resolve to have more face time...less emails and texts. Communication with neighbors that strengthens and builds community. Resolve to visit more, to talk more (with each other and not at each other), to smile more, to laugh more, to serve more and to love more. Keep the nativity out, all year long.