

Pastor Martha Schwehn Bardwell  
Sermon for January 6, 2019 – Epiphany  
Matthew 2:1-12

Here we are at the beginning of 2019. At the start a new calendar year, many of us pause to reflect and wonder. We look back over the last year and survey the state of the world and of our lives. And we look forward at the expanse of days and months ahead, with fresh resolve, to walk in ways of wisdom, truth, and love. Some of us make resolutions. And underneath those resolutions or lack of resolutions we are still asking ourselves: How can I walk with more wisdom this year? How can I walk in love and truth? And how can we do that together?

It's into this moment ripe with possibility and wondering that this story of the magi, the wise ones, comes to us. On this feast day of the Epiphany in the church, we are invited with our siblings in faith from around the globe, to walk with these wise ones and to let the wisdom, love and truth of Christ shine on our lives and our questions.

We don't get to know the magi beyond this short passage in the gospel of Matthew. What biblical scholars tell us is that the magi were the scientists of their day (in a time when science and religion weren't seen as separate things but as pursuits of the same divine truth). They were astrologers, mystics and priests in Persia, in modern day Iran. And they were esteemed and respected as wise, welcomed into the courts of the powerful to share insight. As we hear in the story, the magi had privilege enough to make this journey from their country and to bring expensive, fine gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Even though they were religious and cultural outsiders, the magi were prominent enough gain an audience with King Herod, who took their quest seriously and saw them as likely allies.

So that's who the magi were – were they alive today, they probably would have PhDs, MDIVs, maybe they would have traveled in space – they'd likely have very impressive credentials. But regardless of all the ways that the magi were considered 'wise' by the world, or might be seen among the wise today, the main way that the magi show forth wisdom in this story is that – **they kneel**. In a posture of humility, they kneel before the one who is Wisdom incarnate, Love incarnate, Jesus Christ. They express their joy and reverence with their gifts, and they open themselves to transformation.

When the wise men humbly kneel before this Christ Child, they do not rise again as the same people they were. Rather it seems that while they were there with Jesus the light of Christ shined its way into their imaginations—even into their subconscious, into their dreams! For it says in our story that after their visit with Jesus, the wise men were warned in a dream not to return to Herod; so they leave for their own country by another road. We

don't know what this other road was like for them, but we can bet that it took no small measure of courage for these foreigners to defy the orders of Herod. This other road home is the road of non-cooperation with evil; it is the road of active nonviolence and resistance. This is the other way the magi show forth wisdom – first they kneel, and then they rise to walk this other road.

Herod in this story stands in harsh contrast to the magi. He hears about Jesus, and all he hears is a political threat. Instead of seeking wisdom, all he seeks is his own political survival and dominance. We hear in his voice a narcissism and insecurity and callousness that is all too familiar to us in our own political landscape. Right after this story, Herod becomes so set on destroying Jesus that he declares a brutal policy of killing all the children 2 years old and under in and around Bethlehem.

The truth is that there are plenty of Herods in our own day who seek to undermine and even annihilate any who stand in the way of their path to power. There are plenty of Herods who may pretend to honor God with their lips, while with their actions, they threaten the lives of children with unjust and brutal policies, with harsh rhetoric and violence. The light of Christ helps us to see and name this evil in the world, and to seek another way, another road, with the magi.

Lately I have been inspired by the witness of a 15 year-old Swedish climate activist named Greta Thunberg.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps you have been inspired by her, too. She made international news last month when she spoke to world leaders at a UN climate summit in Poland. She confronted these leaders with a stark message about their moral failure to take dramatic and decisive action on climate change:

She said to these leaders: “You say you love your children above all else, and yet you are stealing their future in front of their very eyes.... You aren't mature enough to tell it like it is. Even that burden you leave to us children. The biosphere is being sacrificed so that people in rich countries like mine can live in luxury. It is the sufferings of the many that pay for the luxuries of the few.” She ended her remarks by saying: “We have come here to let you know that change is coming whether you like it or not. The real power belongs to the people. Thank you.”

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<sup>1</sup> In this sermon, I quoted and drew from these articles about Greta Thunberg:

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2018/12/15/teenage-activist-calls-leaders-not-mature-enough-take-action-climate-change/?utm\\_term=.849b4646fa05](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2018/12/15/teenage-activist-calls-leaders-not-mature-enough-take-action-climate-change/?utm_term=.849b4646fa05)

<https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/the-fifteen-year-old-climate-activist-who-is-demanding-a-new-kind-of-politics>

Greta has the voice of a prophet, but she could also be seen as a magi of our time – in that she embodies a wisdom that we see springing from the manger, this wisdom of great love for humanity and creation, this wisdom of noncooperation with evil, this wisdom of ‘another road.’

Even before this speech I quoted, Greta was making news. Earlier this fall, she held a school strike for climate, walking out of her school and sitting on the steps of the Swedish Parliament for weeks demanding action. She said that many members of parliament would stop by and express support for her position, while also commenting that she should really be at school. These leaders who were trying to put Greta in her place didn’t seem to get it – this girl was on another road.

Last year Greta was also nominated for a prestigious award because of her activism – the Children’s climate prize. But Greta asked to be removed from consideration, noting that most people would have to fly to the awards ceremony. “All finalists are to be flown in from all over the world, to be a part of a ceremony, has no connection with reality,” she wrote. “Our generation will never be able to fly (among other things), other than for emergencies. Because the adult generations have used up all our carbon budget.” Again – she is on another road. It’s a road of love...not soft, sentimental love, but wise and truth-telling love, love that she lives out in her actions, in her nonconformity, with courage.

We, too, are called to be magi in our own place. We are called to kneel before Christ who embodies hope for all the children of the world, and we are called to rise up to walk another road.

So as we begin another year, let us be resolved with joy, with humility, with wisdom, to do some kneeling. To humble ourselves before Christ, and to open ourselves to transformation. To kneel before the one who called us to receive the reign of God like a little child, and who took a little child in his arms and said, “Whoever welcomes a child, welcomes me.” To kneel before the one who said, “You cannot serve God and wealth” and pointed our gaze away from our anxieties and worries, to the birds of the air and the lilies of the field that show forth the beauty and grandeur and abundance of God. To kneel before this one who entered into creation to take the path not of revenge but of nonviolence and self-giving love. To kneel before this one whose words and promises are true, and who shows forth in his death and resurrection that love and forgiveness and peace are the ultimate way.

As we seek to walk in wisdom this year, let us kneel and then rise up with the magi, to walk on other roads, with courage, trusting that God is indeed with us – and that Christ is shining on our path. I want to end with a prayer for all of us for the year ahead, which some of you

know as the Prayer of Good Courage but it may well be thought of as a Prayer of the magi, a prayer of the wise ones. You can with join me if you know it:

O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us, and your love supporting us, through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.