NINTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*Adoration of the Magi* Matthew 2:1-12

The Magi, the central characters in the passage we just heard, they were on a mission, and what an amazing mission it was! After having researched and studied, these three men saw something in their books, in their calculations, and in the stars that told them they must go in search of a child.

A child! A new king, but a king unlike any other they had seen.

We are not told what kind of a king they thought they were looking for. All they knew was that that this child was so important that nothing else mattered except finding him and honoring him. To do this, they left the comfort of their homes and studies and struck out into the unknown to find this new king, this precious child.

In the gospel of Matthew, such importance is made most obvious by way of pedigree. We see this in the way he chooses to begin his gospel. Matthew begins with Jesus’ pedigree, tracing his ancestral line back to Abraham and Isaac.

Matthew also introduces us to the Magi, and to Herod. He does this with the understanding that his readers will know who each of these people are, and what they represent—their origins and importance.

The Magi, also known as the "three kings" from the "orient," according to the well-known Christmas carol, were actually not kings. They were scholars. They were men who studied the stars and followed wisdom practices also known as the occult.

While this sounds strange to our modern sensibilities, such scholars and practitioners may also be thought of as ancient precursors of the scientists we know today. Such men sought out esoteric knowledge and they tested and researched their findings. If their studies proved useful or impressive as spectacle they could make a good living in the courts of kings and other royalty.

Certainly the Magi in Matthew seem to have been good and important scholars. Their journey, the fact that they were received by Herod in his palace, and the expensive gifts they brought for Jesus, were evidence of their wealth and their importance.

As for their visit: although most nativity scenes show the Magi crowded into the stable of Jesus' birth—along with the shepherds, animals, an angel, Mary, Joseph and the baby—the Magi were almost certainly later visitors to the Holy Family, coming perhaps as long as two years after Jesus' birth. So he would have been a toddler, very much like Wyatt.

By then, Joseph had no doubt found better lodging for his family, which is probably why Matthew says the wise men entered "the house" to find Jesus. But whatever the time and place, these Gentile visitors "knelt down and paid him homage."

Matthew’s point is that Jesus’ birth was not only a phenomenon known in one small part of the world. Jesus’ birth was an event that the whole world acknowledged and revered. Jesus *was* the Holy Child whom all the world would come to know; to whom all the world would come to bow down before. He was and is the whole world’s good news.

Well, maybe not *everyone’s* good news. As we heard in the passage: it was not King Herod’s good news. To Herod, also known as Herod the Great, Jesus was a threat.

This is because, after initially having served as governor over Galilee (47-37 B.C.), and after surviving several attempts to have him deposed, Herod was eventually appointed, by the Roman government, to govern Judea. It was the Romans who made him king and gave him the title "King of Judea." He was Rome’s puppet, and the latest insult to the people of Jerusalem.

So, given Herod's lengthy tenure as a despot, once the wise men reach Jerusalem and ask, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?" it is no wonder that their query not only threatens Herod, but also all of the people of Judea since the region's established political stability is immediately viewed as being vulnerable.

The concern of the ruling class and populace is intensified further when the Magi report a celestial sign confirming the birth of the new king. "For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage" [v. 2], they tell Herod. So, it is understandable that Herod and the leaders in Jerusalem were troubled by the Magi and their news.

When we think about it, we have to acknowledge that most “new” things are an adjustment. Most new things, whether the new thing is a new brand of laundry soap, to a new way of thinking about gender, to new evidence about the health and well being of the environment—these are all new things, new thoughts, new information that challenges our former understanding. New things require us to change. They may even require us to examine our older or current practices—even our values.

This is definitely what is happening among the people in Matthew’s passage about the Magi. Something new is happening in the world. A new king has been born and he is definitely *not* the one in the palace. He is not the one surrounded by wealth, privilege, and earthly power.

Matthew does not tell us what the Magi thought when the star led them to the home of a carpenter—a humble house. We do not know if they stopped and rechecked their charts and calculations before they knocked on Mary and Joseph’s door. Were they confused? Of had they had another revelation that was not recorded in the gospel?

Perhaps they had already come to the conclusion that the king they were looking for was not going to be the kind of king with whom they were used to dealing. Perhaps their scholarship had already prepared them to pay their respects to a new kind of king—one that would bring the rule of love and compassion, over political force and violence, into the world and make it holy. Perhaps they had seen in the stars that justice and peace were to become this king’s mission in the world.

In stepping out into the world to “follow his star,” the Magi made finding this new king their mission. In deed, and in effect all that was born into the world with him—this was what was vital for them to find and lift up in honor and gratitude. This is what was important to them to find, to see with their own eyes, and to kneel down before in person.

Was their mission accomplished in this finding and moment of adoration?

Well, we know that after the Magi found Jesus, they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, so they "left for their own country by another road." That referred to a different route, of course, but in another sense, they could never go home the same way again, not after Bethlehem.

So, what was the mission *after* Bethlehem?

I believe it was just the beginning of the “adoration of the Magi.” Meeting Jesus, falling on their knees before a child in humble surroundings—especially after having visited the seat of political power in Judea—this had to have an effect on the Magi.

Where once they might have scoffed at kneeling before anyone who was not dressed in silks and jewels and finery, sitting on a throne in a palace, the Magi have had an experience that has moved them to joy and reverence in a completely new and unusual setting.

In a way, this is the effect of Jesus on all who accept him as their Savior. Everything has changed. In fact, as followers of Christ, the only thing that does *not* change is his love for us. However, love often changes a whole lot of things—over and over again.

Love is what can move us, the way it did the Magi, to leave the comfort of home and go on a journey to find Christ—again and again—as we approach and cross new frontiers; as we leave behind what has been, and receive what is new, what is changing right before our eyes.

For us, that means acknowledging the new frontiers we are approaching. This is very much what we are doing here at Nu‘uanu Congregational Church.

The good news is that moving forward, continuing God’s mission in the world, this is not going to require that we pack up and leave. That is our good news. Our mission is where it has always been: here in Nu’uanu Valley. Our mission—which is to say: the mission God has called us to is also the same: to hold space in this community for the presence of God’s love and grace to grow and flourish. This is what the work that was shared with us in our meeting after church last week was all about.

The new part of it will be in how we will do that. It will not look the same as it has in the past, but that is just the cosmetic part of it.

What will be the same is the welcome we will offer in Christ’s name.

What will be the same is the way in which people’s lives will be changed in good and wholesome ways as they, and we, again discover what it means to be a place of healing, support, and compassion. We are and will be a place where these good things are cultivated in our own hearts and minds, and in the hearts and minds of the people who visit and are made welcome here on our campus.

As we continue our mission, let us remember the Magi. Let us nurture in ourselves the same determination they had. Let us be inspired by their journey, let us be moved by their courage in braving unknown countries and despot kings to find and honor Christ. Let us continue to work together for the *Faith, Hope, and Mission* of the God we love and serve.

Let this be so. Amen.