

Faith Mennonite Church  
January 4, 2015 - Epiphany  
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**The risk, the reward, ... and the risk**  
Isaiah 60:1-6; Ephesians 3:1-13; Matthew 2:1-12

Happy New Year! Welcome back to all who traveled over the holidays. I hope that all of us, at home or away, with family or friends, or perhaps in solitude, were able to join the magi in paying homage to Jesus our Savior, worshipping the king born in a manger, God entering into human flesh and human experience.

It would be tempting, in the spirit of our usual New Year's wishes for prosperity and resolutions for self-improvement, to wish for all of us a journey in the coming year that is *less precarious* than that which the magi traversed. But this is *not* what the gospel offers us today! Both of our scripture passages, Matthew's magi account and the Apostle Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus are bracketed by situations of deep vulnerability. The magi, some sort of astrologers and magicians, left the security of their home country, possibly Babylon, to follow a new star they had observed. How much food and water do you take on a journey when you're not sure what your destination is? And if you carry gifts fit for a king—gold and incense—you surely need to be on the lookout for highway bandits. There was more than a little risk at the beginning of their journey.

And after they found what they were looking for, this newborn king of the Jews, they received a dream that told them that King Herod was up to no good, wanted to harm that child and they should go home by another route. Don't double back to Jerusalem. It sounds simple enough, but I wonder how long they watched their backs, waiting to see if Herod would send a search party in pursuit and drag them back for questioning. For the magi there was risk at the beginning of their quest and after their pivotal moment of worship and adoration.

Likewise, Paul is writing his letter to the Ephesians from prison. We don't know the conditions of the prisons that Paul spent time in. Maybe he had adequate food, and a warm enough blanket. Maybe he was separated from the more violent prisoners. At least he was allowed to communicate through letters. But his references to being a prisoner and to suffering provide the bookends for the portion of his letter that we read this morning.

What, then, is the good news as we enter a new year? What is the invitation, the truth that the magi and Paul found so compelling that they would seek it out and share it with others despite the risk, despite ongoing vulnerability even imprisonment?

The magi represent a deep longing for a new experience of God. Their expectation as they set out on their quest was not to find something they could acquire or benefit from. No, they left carrying gifts they intended to use for paying homage, to give away in their devotion to the new king they expected to find. And their offering of gifts no doubt lightened their load and made their get-away a bit more agile when it became clear that they should avoid Herod.

The good news and invitation of the magi is that we experience God more deeply as we move out in faith, toward Christ, not knowing exactly where the quest will take us. The good news and the invitation of the magi is that our finest worship is the offering of ourselves to God, orienting our lives toward what we can contribute and share with others as the boy Jamie did in the children's story. The good news and invitation of the magi is that none of us are beyond the scope of some defined boundary of who can search for God. No craziness in our past or our present, no lack of pedigree or a particular church or ethnic culture presents an obstacle. The only thing that's needed for drawing close to Christ is a desire and a willingness to walk into the unknown.

The Apostle Paul couldn't have been more different from the magi. He was an insider, fully at home in Israel, even Roman-occupied Israel, for he was Jewish and he was a Roman citizen. He didn't play around with things like astrology or magic—he was a Pharisee, one who carefully studied, followed, and enforced proper Jewish religious practice. Unlike the magi who left security in search of something new, Paul, originally known as Saul, was set on preserving security, preserving the status quo. In the early

days of the church, he went about rounding up those who were members of the community that believed Jesus was divine and that his death and resurrection ushered in a new day of God's new work in the world. Saul wasn't looking for the novel; his world-view was Israel and Jewish-centric.

Ironically, although Saul wasn't on a new God quest, God came in pursuit of him. The blinding encounter that Saul had with God, recorded in the book of Acts, made him do a one-eighty, set him on a quest to invite as many people, Jews and non-Jews alike, to join in the community of grace that he came to understand and embrace. That turn-around was so profound that Saul changed his name to Paul. And while many churches and cathedrals now bear his name, and a good portion of the New Testament preserves his writing, we would be completely mistaken if we thought that these things indicated that his quest ended in privilege and tranquility and a renowned place of respect during his lifetime. None of those things came about for Paul. If we read the book of Acts, we find Paul imprisoned, ship-wrecked, and misunderstood, both by the church leaders in Jerusalem and the religious and civic leaders in other parts of Asia Minor where he traveled and witnessed. Likewise his own letters reveal challenges to his authority, competition with other leaders, and disappointment when churches that he helped found went astray.

So what was it that motivated Paul if not the usual rewards that most of us seek? Paul was completely swept away by this new realization and experience that God was doing a whole new thing in history through Jesus. That God wanted *everyone, all communities, cultures, and languages*, to enjoy the fullness of God's love, to receive forgiveness and find a favored place in God's realm. The only way Paul could explain this was that it was a mystery. God had intended this all along, but kept it hidden. It was so radically different from what Saul was raised to expect, that Paul totally re-oriented his life and essentially gave up his former privilege within his religious community. He never ceased being a Jew but he could no longer be exclusively Jewish in the traditional ways. Jesus broke through the boundaries and pushed down the walls and Paul stepped bravely into that new world.

What is Paul's gift and invitation to us as we begin a new year? First, Jesus makes a way for all of us. Regardless of our backgrounds, there is room in God's household for everyone of us—and for every one of the people we daily encounter, even people who seem to have no interest or whose lives seem beyond repair.

Second, never underestimate how radically God might work in our day. Those who have worked for lgbtq justice and marriage equality have been stunned by how quickly the number of states legalizing gay marriage has grown in the past two years. While the struggle has seemed harder and slower in the church, change is certainly happening. David P. Gushee, a leading evangelical scholar who teaches Christian ethics, reviewed five books in the most recent *Sojourners* magazine. These books, all published in 2013-14 and written by respected evangelicals, argue for a new posture of welcome and hospitality, and a theology of compassion and understanding for lgbtq persons. Many traditionalists ask how we can change an understanding or practice that the church has held so long. With Paul we may need to say, "it is a mystery that God kept hidden until now."

With the magi and Paul, let us step out in faith as we begin this new year. Let us be open to taking the risky, uncharted path, if we sense a call from God. Let us consider what we might give up that would lighten our load and draw us closer to God and benefit others. Let us be open to new ideas and understanding, alert for the mysteries that God is still unfolding around us. Happy New Year.