



FIRST CONGREGATIONAL  
CHURCH UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST  
— Stockbridge, Massachusetts —

## *Searching for Signs of God*

**January 6, 2019**  
**Epiphany Sunday**

**Text: Matthew 2**

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.’ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, ‘In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: “And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.”’ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, ‘Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.’ When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.



**Sermon:**

Perhaps more than another year that I can remember, this year I have heard stories and tales about miracles somehow bursting forth at Christmas time. Maybe it is because our times are not unlike those original times—times of difficulty in the

world, times where people are longing and searching and hoping and wondering . But this year I have heard fro so many different people about how miracles snuck up on them and surprised them in the most unlikely of settings and ways. I have heard about the unexpected joy of family coming together for a Christmas dinner when joy was not exactly on the menu this year. I have heard people tell me about small whispers of God’s love coming forth in connect-ions that had long been sought but not so recently found. Over and over again, I have heard about in-breakings of the spirit that came unbidden and unexpected, surprising and seemingly unreal almost like the sound of bells and hooves on the rooftop on Christmas Eve. And after all, that is completely in keeping with the nature of this season; Christmas itself is at its root and at heart an in breaking.

When the world was broken and breaking; when joy was not on the menu and when the holy seemed so far away, God sent love wrapped in flesh on Christmas day, a most surprising, unexpected turn of events. The angels in the skies sang forth from the heavens in beauteous melody, almost as unreal or impossible as those bells jingling from the harness of the reindeer. It was all so unexpected, impossible and unreal—unless you were looking for it. Remember, this is not the first time that God has worked in this way, and it will not be the last time either. It would have been shocking unless you were searching for some sign—unless your whole body and your life were trained to be ready for the impossible possibility to break forth in the most unlikely of ways.

They were. They were searching. They were looking; they were watching—those magi. They were wise people—astrologers, really. They understood that there would be in breakings; they understood that God would manifest things and there would be signs if only you just looked for them. So they watched the heavens day after day after day, actively searching for a sign, and these magi finally found what they were looking for—a star that rose and that was not supposed to be there—a star that was impossibly bright, rising up into the sky. By looking at that star, somehow they knew that that star heralded the birth of a king—the birth of a king of the Jews. So they set out to see what that might be all about. There is no indication in any telling of this story that these wise people knew the nature of this king, for by this time the people of Israel were not part of any glorious kingdom; they were occupied country. And yet these magi set off bearing gifts (by the way, Matthew never says there were three of them); they set off looking for this king because they had been looking for a sign.

CS Lewis writes about the miracles of Christmas as the “missing chapter.” He calls Christmas the missing chapter that suddenly comes into focus and makes the rest of the great story come to life. It is, of course, the story of God’s love affair with the people—the story of creation arcing toward goodness—the story of release from captivity—the story of this ongoing relationship. CS Lewis would say that it is the

incarnation—this in breaking of the small child into the stable that would serve as the missing chapter—the one that binds the whole thing together in ways that now make sense and that never did before.

In our reading group for Christmas, I was amazed how many times authors came up with this notion that the incarnation posed as a hinge not just on which the world turns—but the hinge by which we must turn. Studying the incarnation, we need not see just an event from history thousands of years ago where truth was breaking forth but rather where evidence of that in breaking continues to be present in our world today. I wonder what those magi must have thought after completing that long journey from the East—a journey that could not have been comfortable, a journey that would have left them worn out and tired? I wonder what they thought, having been sent out for this earth-changing, game-changing birth of a new king. I wonder what they thought when suddenly they saw that star parked over a stable—maybe even a cave—certainly nothing grand or glorious. Yet, the reading says that upon seeing it their hearts were filled with joy. Their beings must have resonated with the truth that yes! This was the spot where the whole world would change.

I wonder what happened when they peeled back the curtains to the stable. I don't know why I always think of curtains; maybe it's because Ted Randolph puts curtains on the stable for our pageant, but I always imagine that instead of the big sliding doors that my grandfather's dairy farm had, that somehow there was a curtain in front. But I wonder what those wise men were thinking when at last they peeked their heads in. Rather than an ornate scene of majesty, instead they saw a poor young woman with a baby lying in straw. But what we do know is this—they knew enough to get on their knees and pay homage to that child. They knew enough to bring the very things that would be denied to Jesus in his lifetime, bringing gold, recognizing that he indeed was royalty. They also brought frankincense and myrrh—the things of anointing and healing, but also the things of burial. The magi recognized that something earth shattering was happening, and they were only there because they were looking for a sign.

Of all the stories that I heard from people talking about miracles this year, it is interesting that many came from people who were engaging their faith quite deeply, perhaps involved in that reading group, reading a devotion every single day and setting their sights on the holy. It raises the question for me about this idea of being prepared. It is being prepared to not just wait for God to come and break into our lives but looking for signs out there in the world that God is doing that every single moment that we draw breath. Annie Lamott writes about her conversion to the Christian faith. She describes that she sensed Christ's presence almost like a cat stalking her through her life until she finally said, 'Come on in; let's get this over with.' In case you think that's just New Age thinking, Psalm 23 says, "Goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life"—follow like being *stalked* or pursued. And I wonder if during

this Epiphany season, if we don't just wait for stories to break forth from this pulpit—stories of baptism and miracles and healing and new beginnings—to break into our lives, but rather—what would this Epiphany season be if we were more like the magi, searching the world for signs of Christ and then following wherever it might lead us? Searching for signs of Christ in topics like gun violence, maybe leading to community dialogue, or searching for signs of Christ in lands ravaged by hurricanes years ago that are still not healed that might lead to mission trips? What would it look like looking for Christ simply in places like Main Street in Stockbridge or North Street in Pittsfield?

You see, Epiphany is about these aha moments breaking in on us; they are indeed about the holy being made manifest, but these magi remind us of an important piece of it—that while God certainly can and does break into our lives when we least expect it, that there is also another model—and that is that we should be actively searching for signs of that in breaking. Friends, we are people of a story; we remember that when God created everything there is, God created it for goodness and relationship. We remember from the very first stories of sin that there are always new beginnings offered to people like Adam and Eve and even Cain. We remember the story through history of how when the people of God groan, God hears. And God is capable of toppling great empires like Egypt, to lead the people out of slavery. We remember how we feel so lost when we're wandering and it feels like an end will never come, that suddenly Promised Lands appear before us. Friends, this is Epiphany, and for the next number of weeks we are going to be bombarded with some of the greatest stories of Jesus in all of scripture. And each Sunday we will have God's mercy break into our hearts and minds, but it will not be a full epiphany season if we don't take responsibility on the days Monday through Sunday to be out there, looking for sings of Christ throughout the world and following wherever that trail might lead.

The two messages I want to leave with you today are this: first, look. Look for signs of the star; look for signs of God's in breaking and then follow them, and second—have the courage of the magi to set out on journeys that seem impossible, and yet have the determination to follow it all the way to the end. Then when you finally arrive, be overjoyed with what you find, even if it was the last thing that you expected. That is how God has always worked, and that is how I believe God is still working today—through people just like you and me, and signs that are just waiting to be discovered.

Amen.



*The Rev. Brent Damrow, Pastor*