

Be Wise Ones
Matthew 2:1-12

1st Pres San Bernardino

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We come to the end of the Christmas season today, and also to a beginning.

The Christmas season ends with Epiphany, the day on which we commemorate the arrival of the Wise Ones from the East who brought their worship and their gifts to the Christ Child.

It is a beginning, because it is the beginning of the Good News of God's involvement in the world being not *just* for the chosen people of Israel, but for those from far away, who represent the rest of us. It's also a new beginning for those whom we will ordain and install as spiritual leaders for our community, who are entrusted with the responsibility of helping us discern God's call to us in the future.

This sermon is particularly for you who will be celebrated, blessed, and prayed for today as leaders. It is also, of course, for the rest of us—because all of us who are baptized into Christ are called to use our gifts to serve the faith community and the world.

Here is what I hope for you this year, framed in the language of the story of the Magi:

We are told that when they entered the house and saw the Christ child, **they knelt down and worshipped.** These men of power and prestige, who were accustomed to chatting with kings, who had both intellectual and financial resources at their disposal, **were not ashamed to express their love and sense of awe when they were in the presence of the One they had been seeking so long.**

This is the first and most important thing.

When we elected you, we said that we believe that you have been “called by God, through the voice of this congregation” to serve as our spiritual leaders. You have been seeking God in your own way your whole life long. We believe that God has plans for you and for the rest of us that only you can accomplish.

Your call is first and foremost a call to follow Christ, to grow closer to him, and to grow more deeply into a person of faith and spirit and depth.

This year, for example, the Session has been talking about “**discernment**”, which means discovering together the next step that we sense God is leading us to take, and “**decision-making**”, which sometimes means no more than following logic or reason, and may involve no prayer at all.

To do discernment as leaders means you must, first of all, desire to be led by the Holy One, and be a person of prayer. My deep hope is that at the end of your term of service, you will look back over your shoulder and know without a doubt that you have changed- that you have learned about your strengths and your limits, about the limitless love of God, and about what it means to kneel down in worship before the One who is worthy.

Then, we are told, **they opened their treasure.**

These wealthy scholars brought gifts of gold- which was precious and expensive, and frankincense- which was used in worship to convey holiness, and myrrh- which was a spice used in burial. We understand their gifts to be symbols of Jesus’ worthiness, and his holiness, and his suffering.

What kinds of treasures might you bring?

Well, I know that some of you bring **particular skills and aptitudes**: there are many who serve this church with their bookkeeping and financial expertise, others who offer computer or construction or contract-writing skills, some who create beauty with textiles or paints or imagination. Others teach, or sing, or make guests and family members feel welcome. You will bring your unique aptitudes and training to this task- How might you open these treasures before God?

You also bring the treasures of **your story- your life experiences and how they have shaped you-** and this will help this congregation to see and hear things we would otherwise miss. Perhaps you have been a parent, perhaps you have known grief, or military service, or poverty or injustice. Perhaps you have deep roots in this place, or perhaps you are a relative newcomer. You will help us to be compassionate and inclusive and wiser than we would be without you- but only if you are willing to open that treasure and share it.

This week I got a copy of the new book written by Rabbi Doug Kohn at Temple Emanu El about faith and cancer. In presenting it to us he said, “those of you who have sat at bedsides and with those in pain know that you cannot say that you’ve been there, unless *you’ve been there.*” He was pointing out that his experience with cancer- a part of his story- has opened doors for healing and care- it is a treasure he has been willing (in his own faith tradition) to open and share.

I hope you will open your treasures.

Finally, we are told that the wise ones were warned in a dream that Herod was not to be trusted, and because of that they **went home by another road.**

As you consider what we are called to do, and who we are called to be in the years ahead, be sure to consider that we may want to experiment with doing things differently.

This has been a year of incredible creativity and risk-taking by this congregation: we have done a capital campaign in the middle of the summer, we have begun a new style of education for our kids,

We have welcomed children into worship

We have launched an incredible adult ed program,

We have enhanced what deacons provide to our neighbors on food distribution days by partnering with a church to provide medical services

And we have charged a committee to find us an Associate Pastor!

We need to hold fast to the gospel that has been handed down to us, and preserve the sense of family and celebration that are part of what makes us unique. But we also need to face new challenges, and to face them in new ways.

Our city continues to struggle with violence, with high student dropout rates, and with conflict on our city council. How can we be 'good news' to our city and our neighbors? We may need to think of another way.

Our congregation is welcoming visitors and new members, while many who have anchored this place for decades are facing physical challenges that prevent them from carrying the bulk of the load. How can we strengthen new leaders and embrace new possibilities?

And when **a new associate pastor joins us**, how will we shape our common life to invite them to open *their* treasures??

We may have to go home by another way.

Learn to kneel. Open your treasures. Don't be afraid to try another way.

And there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising. Follow that star. It will always lead you Home.