

Interpreting the Dream

A Sermon by **Rev. Laurie McKnight-Walker**

Biblical References: Ephesians 3:1–12, Matthew 2:1–12

Date: Epiphany – January 6, 2008

The season of Christmas is nearly behind us and we may be busy stripping our homes of decorations, taking gifts out of their boxes, hanging up new 2008 calendars if we haven't already done so. A common question in families during the shopping spree of November and December is “what do you *really* want for Christmas?” Our son Luke is both the easiest and hardest person to buy for because his answer is usually the same – “oh nothing really, or maybe just money, or something from Future Shop.”

I was surprised though this Christmas to have met a number of people who have started to distance themselves from our now secular version of Christmas, and who don't exchange any gifts during the Christmas season anymore and simply revel in getting together to eat (too much) and visit friends and family. They feel strangely richer by taking this approach and somewhat self-righteous.

What do we *really* want? What do we really dream for? It is a question that is also being asked right now of the American people as they enter into the Primaries to elect their candidate to run for the Democratic Party. As the candidates prepared for the first Primary this week in Iowa we heard lots of answers to that question, but the most common refrain was the need for change – change in political leadership, change in the economy, change in the war in Iraq. It will be interesting and important for us to listen in to our neighbours to the south as they discern their future together.

What do we really want here in Canada, in Kingston? Sustainable economies that will provide meaningful jobs for people to be able to support themselves and their families; an end to child poverty; for progress towards peace in Afghanistan so that our military will know that their mission has not been in vain; for better health for all of us so our health care system will not be so stressed; for some concrete plans for our city emerging from the Poverty Round Table; for real ways to feel that we can contribute to keeping our earth green and sustainable. Maybe for some it is just to have our sidewalks plowed and snow banks removed!

We appropriately begin our year in the season of Epiphany, the season celebrating light in the darkness, the growing understanding of God's truth for the world and for ourselves. Matthew will lead our search for what we really want with rich and creative stories of woven out of his ancient Jewish scriptures interpreted with the lens of fulfillment. These stories will deepen our experience of being led by a mysterious and wise God who knows us and will lead us to know the deeper purpose of our lives. We will be given the choice on whether to put our faith into action.

Today we are led into deep understandings of our purpose and what we might truly dream for by noticing the light of a rising star. It was an unusually bright star, one that caught the attention of Magi, Zoroastrian priests or Babylonian astrologers who lived east of Israel who determined that the star's brightness and movement meant that a new king was being born. This would be a king who would satisfy human longings like no other and so initiated a long and arduous journey so that they could pay homage.

It would also turn out to be a dangerous journey, this search for the Christ child, for they would be encountered by King Herod. A paranoid and bitter king, he did not relish having any competition in Israel. Later in the chapter we will learn that he went so far as to order the massacre of the infants in and around Bethlehem who were under the age of two in order to eliminate anyone who would get in the way of satisfying his dream of complete power and control. His military was poised to act on his command.

For those who follow after the Christ child, who follow the Prince of Peace, the Wonderful Counselor, the Everlasting Father, the one who was foretold by the prophet Isaiah, it will not always be an easy journey. We know that the Herod's of this world still exist, and still have military, financial, media and political power at their disposal to satisfy their needs for domination and control. We hear of it almost every week in the news. This week we see it being played out tragically in Pakistan with the assassination of Benazir Bhutto and in the growing tribal conflicts, political corruption in Kenya which are erupting into terrible violence, hunger and homelessness.

Intuiting the corruption of King Herod, the Magi continued their journey, led by a brilliant star until it came to rest over Bethlehem, stopping over the place where the child was. How could a child, son of a poor mother and father, later raised in an out of the way village called Nazareth, become the Saviour and the hope of the world, not just of the Jews who already worshiped God, but for all people of all races and cultures?

Right at the beginning of his gospel account of the good news of Jesus Christ, Matthew foreshadows that Jesus' journey too will not be easy as he engages with the powers, economic, political and spiritual, that destroy people's lives. We know the story well, how Jesus poured out his entire life in order to share the brilliant light of God's love and wisdom to people that were clearly following on the wrong path, the path of death and destruction.

Jesus showed people the path where light and life could be lived and shared eternally, in every generation. Life would be found through path of friendship, the path of truth-telling, the path of forgiveness and reconciliation, the path of prayer and the study of moral laws, through the path of risk and adventure, the path of learning and transformation, through the path of sharing food and shelter, through the powerful path of sharing dreams – God's dreams for our world.

Today we begin again what will be a wonderful, somewhat frightening, adventurous and thoughtful journey in listening for God's dreams for our lives, both as individuals and as a family of faith.

Together we will be moving beyond simple consensus by voting to a clearer discernment of God's dream for our congregation and our Christian community here in Kingston. This winter we will be continuing the conversation with one another about God's dream for our church. In writing about the simplicity of human conversation as a force in creating global change, scientist and author Margaret Wheatley states: "There is no power equal to a community discovering what it cares about."

Through the use of a United Church resource called *Alive and Well: Renewed Purpose for Healthier Congregations*, we will enter a new visioning process which you are all invited to participate in each Sunday for the next four weeks immediately after the worship service and social time. A simple definition of visioning is "a structured conversation by a group of people about what they believe God calls them to be or to do."

Gil Rendle and Alice Mann who have written an excellent guide to this planning process called *Holy Conversations*, compare this time of discernment when we search for God's wisdom together, to what it is like when you are driving your car down the road on a dark night. It is a

times like that when you rely on your headlights which you know do not show you where you will eventually end up, but they do illuminate the next part of the road.

The starlight that the Magi followed led them to encounter Jesus Christ for themselves, the Holy Child of God, and there they witnessed God's gift of life-changing love for the world. It is no wonder that they were filled with joy. Then, when it was time to leave, to carry this love and joy within them to their families and to the rest of the world, the star light was gone but they found within them a new dream, a dream which led them forward by another way, a way which was safe from harm, a way of radical loving, a way which helped them find what their hearts truly desired.

May each of you be blessed in the coming days and months ahead with hope and joy knowing that God's dream in you is truly coming to birth.

Prayers of the People

Hear our prayer of thanksgiving, O God, for the Christmas story brought to fulfillment now in the coming of the magi. Help us appreciate their courageous journey and their determination to follow the light wherever it might lead them. Help us see them anew in the story of Jesus birth as strangers and outsiders who were welcomed into the life of faith formed by God's amazing love. May we too be people who are not afraid to welcome others into our circles of love and care. May their joy and generosity give us joy in our journeys of faith, and inspire us to be generous givers of our time, talent and treasure as your righteous kingdom comes.

In this dark time of the year we ask you, gracious God, to fill us with the light of your love and healing. Look with love over the needs of this world, and enlighten us with your wisdom and compassion. Watch over all with governing power both here in Kingston, in Canada and around the world, and touch them with care for those with great needs.

We pray for your congregation here at Queen St in this new year as we begin a renewed time of visioning and sharing in conversation about your dream for us, praying for those who have accepted the role of leadership in this season of discernment.

Healing God, watch over the many who are sick in body, mind, and soul. We name before you in the quiet of our hearts the ones we love, the ones for whom we seek your healing power and comfort.

We pray for those places where power has corrupted the dream of peaceful community, where violence, fear and suffering abound. We pray for the people of Pakistan.... for the people of Kenya..... for their families here in Canada who wait for word of their safety. We pray for those who are so consumed by the darkness they cannot see the light. We commend them to your great love, O God, and we ask for courage in facing such dark powers in our world.

O Prince of Peace, in this afterglow of Christmas, we long for the absence of warfare among the nations. We grow weary of violence and bloodshed as a response to conflict. Teach us your way of peace, in our homes, our neighborhoods, our schools, our places of work and our world.

Enable us, O God of the journey, to turn and find and to live out of the new way of life which will glorify both the child Jesus, gift of vulnerable love and hope, and the man Jesus, who showed us the risky path of faith where self is sacrificed and love is multiplied.

Guide us by your light and joy as we pray together saying....
Our Father....