

**Davidson College Presbyterian Church**  
**Davidson, North Carolina**  
**Lib McGregor Simmons**  
**Matthew 2: 1-12**  
**“We’re All In This Together”**  
**2nd Sunday after Christmas Day**  
**January 3, 2016**

In many parts of the world, Epiphany is a bigger holiday than Christmas. While many here have already taken down the Christmas tree and stashed the holiday lights in the attic, Christians who live elsewhere are gearing up for celebrations that involve diving for a crucifix that has been tossed into an icy cold river or lake in Eastern Europe, baptizing babies in similarly frigid waters, parades where people dress up in the costumes of the Three Kings and eat a slice of King Cake or in one Spanish town where geese whose necks have been draped with holiday baubles get to be the grand marshals of the parade. In some places, children leave shoes filled with hay outside their homes. The hay is for the camels of the Magi, who leave gifts for the children as thanks before resuming their journey to Bethlehem. (It was Gian-Carlo Menotti’s memories of this Italian holiday tradition which inspired him to write his “Amahl and the Night Visitors.”)

The centerpiece of these Epiphany celebrations is the story of the Magi’s visit to the Christ Child, of course. This story has all the elements of a “once upon a time” story.

Like the exotic perfumes brought as gifts by these mysterious travelers, the narrative lingers enticingly in the senses. (1) It possesses the quality of something that happened long, long ago and far, far away.

But like all the best stories, and surely this is one of Christianity’s, most-loved stories, the characters of the story do not exist merely in a time and place long, long ago and far, far away, and they do not only inhabit our imaginations. Rather, they are alive in the here and now in the experiences of ourselves and other faithful people that we know.

At the 9:45 service, worshipers are viewing an imaginative video which has Mary emailing Joseph with the news that she is pregnant, Joseph using Google maps to figure out how far it is from Nazareth to Bethlehem, clicking on a donkey to resume his transportation rental, announcing Jesus’s birth on Facebook and Twitter, sending out an evite to which the magi respond before proceeding to order their baby gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh on Amazon.

It’s clever and humorous. It’s very here and now, but it ends with a statement that points to the story’s timelessness: Times change. Feelings remain the same.

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Indeed.

The story of the Magi is a timeless story because it is about feelings which remain the same. It is about spiritual hunger, of our deepest human longings to be saved from everything that would hold us back from following stars and paying attention to dreams. I believe this hunger to be of God, and I trust that you do too...that your coming to church at all on this first Sunday of 2016 has been initiated by God’s Holy Spirit, the One who initiates all our asking, our seeking, and our finding. (2)

One of the things that is striking about this story is that the Magi’s asking, seeking, and finding is by no means an individual quest.

Contrary to the popular carol “We Three Kings of Orient Are,” Matthew does not speak of three magi, nor does he refer to them as kings. The number three was apparently deduced from the number of gifts. Rather than three royal riders silhouetted against the desert sky, it would perhaps be more accurate to think of a larger caravan including magi, servants, and supplies, perhaps traveling together for weeks and even months. (3)

And, perhaps in an individualistic culture like ours where isolation and loneliness more often than not are part and parcel of our spiritual hunger, the communal aspect of the Magi’s journey is incredibly important in our appropriating Matthew’s once-upon-a-time story as our own contemporary and personal story.

In recent days, a Facebook posting by Sheryl Sandberg about her New Year’s resolutions has been making the rounds. You will remember that Sheryl Sandberg is the Facebook executive who is the author of the best seller *Lean In*. Several months ago, Sheryl’s husband Dave died suddenly.

I imagine that a number of you have read it. And if you have, I have a hunch that you were moved, perhaps even profoundly, as I was, by the truth of her words.

In the posting, she bears witness to the importance of a circle of people, fellow journeyers, if you will, with whom you are not afraid to be weak and vulnerable, who hold you accountable in your asking, seeking, and finding, and whose commitment simply to showing up when you need them holds great power to pull you through the times that life rises up and smacks you in the solar plexus and threatens to shove you off your spiritual path and throw you in the ditch.

“New Year’s is the traditional time of rebirth, renewal, and resolutions. This year, New Year’s has more meaning for me than ever before.

Last year, my resolution was to meditate for ten minutes every day. I shared this with my Lean In Circle of childhood girlfriends who all made their own resolutions. We were determined to support one another and knew that we’d be more likely to succeed if we held one another accountable. So we opened our monthly Circle meetings by sharing progress on our resolutions. We did not always stick to our plans, but we were in it together.

When my husband, Dave, passed away last spring, my whole notion of plans crumpled. I stopped trying to meditate, but my connection to this group of friends was one of the things that helped pull me through. They checked in daily. Even though they live across the country, they showed up early and often. They did not just hold me as I cried—they cried with me. One day when I was feeling particularly alone and down, a card from one of them arrived in the mail. It said, ‘One day she woke up and understood we’re all in this together.’ It has hung above my desk ever since.

These amazing women have supported me since I was ten years old—through ups and downs, laughter and tears, life and now death. Together, we have been through adolescence, college, starting careers and families. They’ve advised me on everything—from what dress to wear to the prom to what job to take. They were part of the inspiration for Lean In Circles and they are a big part of why I am able to smile again.

I believe deeply that everyone needs this kind of help and connection. We all need people who encourage us, believe in us, and remind us that we are not alone. For women, this kind of support can be especially important in navigating our lives and pursuing our ambitions. Too often the world tells women why they can’t do something; our friends are the ones who tell us we can... and help us figure out how.” (4)

In this first week of 2016, this is how I have come to see the Magi.

The term Magi gains strength when we think of the Magi as an intentionally gathered group which recognizes that we are on a journey not of days, but of weeks, of months, of years of encouraging one another, believing in one another, reminding each other that we are never alone.

A number of you can attest to how important such groups are to you. You experience it here at Davidson College Presbyterian Church in the Brindisi Men’s Bible Study on Tuesday morning or the men’s study group at Friday morning, in a circle or the Shalom study group, in a Disciple class or Gathering Around the Word or POPS – Parents of Preschoolers or the retired ministers group in AA, NA, or PFLAG. It’s true for me through a group of 14 clergywomen who have made a commitment to be with each other to pray and study, laugh and weep together for several days every year, and to keep on praying for and encouraging one another throughout the year when we are physically apart...we have done it now for going on 17 years, and I don’t know where we would be without the support.

Well, actually, I do know. Or at least I am pretty sure that I know where I would be. Without my fellow Magi, not only the Preaching Roundtable group, but others with whom I am in community intentionally, I would be far more of a Herod than I am. You will remember how Matthew describes Herod, “When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him.”

Without our fellow Magi, we are more afraid. Without fellow Magi, we follow far fewer stars and pay attention to far fewer dreams.

In the company of our fellow Magi, we don’t give in to fear. We veer away from the temptation to protect and preserve our power. We feel less threatened and are able to take more joy in God’s ever-expanding embrace, even in the darkest of times. (5) We pay attention to dreams and we follow stars.

It helps us to think of the Magi as a caravan who had gather their supplies and stick it out together for weeks or months, because it gives us a sense that if we are really going to experience what “we are all on this spiritual journey together” is like, it takes intentionality and commitment. Perhaps there is no better time than the beginning of a new year for each of us to become more intentional about such community...about committing not only to worshiping, learning, serving, loving, and giving, but committing to a small group of people who are about one or some or all of these things. There are lots of opportunities here at DCPC. And we are always open to the

Spirit's nudge to begin new opportunities, so don't hesitate to speak up if feel the Spirit nudging YOU to start something new.

My dear brothers and sisters, the Magi's story is our story. Through their story, we remember anew: We, our God who is Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit, and indeed the whole creation, are all in this together.

1. Thomas G. Long, *Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 16.
2. Stephen Bauman, "Pastoral Perspective: Matthew 2: 1-12," *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 1*, edited by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 216.
3. Paul J. Achtemeier, "Exegetical Perspective: Matthew 2: 1-12," *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 1*, edited by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 213.
4. Sheryl Sandberg, Facebook posting, December 30, 2015.
5. Craig A. Satterlee, "Commentary on Matthew 2: 1-12," [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org), January 6, 2013.