

Magi Tricks  
Epiphany Sunday  
January 7, 2018  
Presbyterian Church in Leonia  
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler

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Isaiah 60:1-6  
Matthew 2:1-12

“It's the Christmas season and a guy walks into a bar in Atlanta, GA and notices a Nativity Scene behind the bar. The Three Wise Men are all wearing fireman's hats. He asks the bartender why the Magi are wearing fireman's hats and the bartender says, "Well, everyone knows that they came from afar.”

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Now, Lois Ziegler and I are about the only ones in this congregation allowed to make fun of Southerners and their accents. I realize there are other Southerners in our congregation like Donna Hunt, from Florida, but true Southerners like me debate whether Florida is actually part of the South since it is so full of people of our neighbors here in New Jersey during the cold months. Lois still has her Southern accent, and I grew up in Atlanta and have deep love for the city even though I sometimes also poke fun of it.

I start out with a little bit of humor, and we have big fun with children dressing up the magi, or three kings in worship, because the appearance of the Magi is about **great joy**. The gospel tells us that when the Magi saw the star they had been following had stopped over the place where Jesus lay, “they were overwhelmed with great joy.” *Overwhelmed* with joy. When was the last time *you* were overwhelmed with joy? Did you laugh so hard

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<sup>1</sup> Joke submitted by Gary Jaskowiak, Gresham, Oregon on *A Prairie Home Companion* with Chris Thile, Minnesota Public Radio

that your body abandoned its normal controls as you unleashed a deep belly gaffaw? Did your eyes squeeze out tears of happiness? Or was your overwhelming joy experienced more internally, as you experienced a clear awareness of the blessings around you? Did you feel gratitude? Deep peace?

Last week Ali Etedali, a friend of our congregation and spouse to Suzanne in our church, sent me an email with links of pictures from a church in Iran called the Vank Cathedral in Isfahan. Ali, who grew up in Iran, remembers that he loved spending most of his free time as a boy in the bookshop across the street from this church-- which, if you know Ali, isn't hard to imagine. But when I clicked on the pictures, I saw a beauty that was far more than I could have imagined. There was a ritual, awe and reverence that stepped outside what I know to be an everyday church experience. Each photo, whether it featured men, women, or children worshiping and receiving blessings, was full of more colors than I could count. The church leadership wore robes, each one a different and vibrant color. The walls were covered in tapestries, gold, and paintings of biblical figures and saints. The priests and bishops had cool hats, and I'm sorry that I don't know the names of the different ones and what they mean: one was a deep navy with gold embroidery, and stood at least two heads above its wearer. Another was cream colored, with blue and gold embroidery and a cross at top. Did I mention that they wore capes? My awe is not so much that I have vestment envy. But instead, I see in these church people in Iran the descendants of the Magi. They seemed like they would be the kind of people to bring boxes brimming with gold, frankincense and myrrh to a christening party.

Indeed, tradition holds that the Magi were astrologers who had travelled from the East, namely Persia which is where Iran is today. The bible doesn't say how many there were, so please do not be bothered by the fact that our children's Christmas pageant only had two Magi. Western Christians have assumed there were three; perhaps so that one carries and

offers each of the three gifts that honored Jesus. Even the Greek term for Magi was derived from an Old Persian name that refers to the Persian priestly caste of Zoroastrianism. They were more likely astrologers than kings-- it was not until hundreds of years later that people started calling them kings rather than Magi.

So, what can these Magi teach us about finding Christ, and in doing so, finding overwhelming joy? We can discover from the texts a few-- ahem, if you will-- Magi tricks.

**1: Look for the light and learn what it may teach you.** “Arise, shine, for your light has come; and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you... you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice.” These words from the prophet in Isaiah make me think of the concept of enlightenment, which I have learned from Eastern religions like Buddhism and Hinduism. Enlightenment can mean both filled with light, and an ability to see divine or true nature. We call this day in the church calendar Epiphany Sunday; an epiphany is a moment of clarity or awareness, an ability to see things for how they really are. For the wise men, they were able to see not only the light, but also Jesus as the bearer of light. Not everyone has the capacity to truly see the makings of joy when they are lying right around us. Spiritual practice, and searching for the light, might clarify your ability to see the light, to recognize the appearance of Christ in surprising places and see the makings of joy, knowing how to build them into your life.

**2: Be willing to humble yourself lower than a baby.** Whether you call them Magi, wise men, or wise kings, these guys were not so fancy that they would not bow themselves lower than a baby laying in an animal feeding trough. Compare that to Herod, the Roman appointed ruler of Judea. Herod was so afraid of the power that would come through a little baby that he demanded that all children under two years old born in and around Bethlehem be slaughtered. There is no secular historical confirmation that this actually happened. However, the Bible describing Herod as

committing this violent act of infanticide forms an important parallel to the Hebrew Scriptures' depiction of Pharaoh in Exodus, who also demanded a slaughter of the Hebrew baby boys, out of fear that one of them would supplant or overtake his power and authority. Moses survived out of the Hebrew babies. Jesus survived out of the Bethlehem babies. The idea that a baby can be the one to upset political order and change the world gives a different understanding of where holy power comes from: *not from authority and might, but from very humble origins.*

The Magi had a sense that in Jesus, the tables would be turned, and they were not threatened by this child but instead humbled themselves before him. If you know me, you know that I am a believer that we too should humble ourselves before children. Their needs and vulnerabilities should have preferential treatment, whether for health care, education, protection from violence, or even a place in the sanctuary to wiggle. We have as much to learn from them- in their capacity for wonder, their availability for love, and in the possibility that brews inside of them-- as they do from us.

**3: You may return home on a different path than the path that brought you to Christ.** This Magi trick was performed when the wise men rejected the demands of an oppressive ruler, Herod. The Magi listened to a dream, in which they were warned not to return to Herod, so they went to their home country taking a different road.

Several of you have spoken with me about the ways you were brought up in the church, or how you began to come to church. Some of you lived in a place where Christianity was a new thing, and you came to church because a friend invited you, or because you felt you were missing something from home. Others of you were brought into church because it was expected of the culture and family around you. Some may have had an intense experience of the Holy Spirit, or deep sense of being bound in a community of faith. And I believe there were ways that you had genuine experiences God's grace through these places and people, that they indeed led you to Jesus and his love.

However, for some of you, there may also have been a rub: Church people misusing power; hypocrisy; using the bible as a weapon against vulnerable people; aligning the Christian faith with a culture of wealth and domination. I know for some in this church, the only way your Christian faith has been able to survive and even grow has been to take a path that is different than the one that initially led you to Jesus. Personally, some of the people who nurtured my early life in the church were also quite racist. It is a hard thing to unravel yourself from racism, especially when it has been taught by people who love you and who you love back. But it has also been in the church that I have learned some tools to resist and even exorcise the demons of racism, in the name of Jesus Christ. This is one of many ways that my journey with Jesus looks different than the road that brought me to him in the first place.

Jan Richardson writes, “Do not expect to return by the same road. Home is always by another way, and you will know it not by the light that waits for you but by the star that blazes inside you, telling you where you are is holy and you are welcome here.”

So, there you have a few Magi tricks to lead you on your journey. May you discover light; may you discover overwhelming joy; may you discover, and rediscover, Jesus Christ. Amen.