

January 6, 2008
Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12
First Parish UCC, Brunswick
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A Spiritual Quest

This past week I had an opportunity to talk with a family who were with us on Dec. 23 for their first Christmas pageant here at First Parish. They expressed appreciation for all the work the young people did to make that service of worship possible. Then the mother said, “I have to say I loved the camel.” You can tell that everyone ‘loves the camel’ by the smiles and chuckles as the camel comes down the center aisle.

I suspect if we were desert nomads who lived among camels on a daily basis, struggling with their obstinate behavior and their spitting we might not look upon them with such fondness. But for us they are a novelty, something to catch the eye and the imagination. They represent the mysterious magi from afar.

It reminded me of the time over twenty years ago when Ron and I went to the Radio City Music Hall Christmas show in New York. At the end of the show there is a live nativity with the usual cast of characters – Mary, Joseph, Jesus, angels, shepherds, and magi. There are also live animals – including sheep and a camel. I have to confess that the thing I remember most about that pageant is the camel.

Interestingly enough, there is no direct mention of a camel in today’s reading from Matthew about the arrival of the magi. The image of the camel comes from a reverberation back to the reading

from the prophet Isaiah where we hear promise of the restoration of Jerusalem – people will come from afar, with a multitude of camels, bringing gifts of gold and frankincense. Over and over again Matthew, who probably is writing to a Jewish audience, connects the story of Jesus to the stories of Moses, King David, and promises for the New Jerusalem. So Matthew has magi come from afar with gifts of gold and frankincense. To this list of gifts, Matthew adds myrrh, as a hint of what is to come, for myrrh is a spice that was used in burial.

This part of Matthew’s Christmas story serves a very important function in this gospel. In chapter one, which Larry talked about last week, Matthew deeply roots Jesus in the Jewish lineage, beginning with father Abraham, down through King David, to Joseph the husband of Mary. Now in chapter two Matthew makes clear that the life and ministry of Jesus is not confined to the Jewish community but is for all people, even strangers from afar. Right from the beginning in this story, gentiles have come to see “the king of the Jews.”

The magi, who are interested in the stars and in dreams, apparently are ones who are deeply pondering the ways of the holy in the midst of a complex world. As astrologers they look for signs in the stars, as interpreters they puzzle over signs from dreams. Ironically, in the

story those very things have led them to the Babe in Bethlehem and have guided them not to disclose his whereabouts. Today we might say they were on a spiritual quest.

We too live in a complex world where many people are on a spiritual quest, where people are exploring the spiritual traditions of the east and the west in their desire to be more attuned with the holy light embodied in the Babe in Bethlehem. In these spiritual quests some people have come, sadly, to see the church as a place to be avoided.

I'm saddened to say how many times when I first meet people outside the church and I'm introduced as a pastor, the person immediately responds, "I have issues with the church." What a greeting! I recognize that for many people these words jump out of their mouths even before they realize it, which tells me that their struggles with the church must be weighing heavy on their hearts.

I think one of the questions for the whole church, including for us here at First Parish, is what happens when questing folk show up at our door? What happens when those who are seeking the holy show up at our door with disturbing questions, different spiritual practices, wearing strange clothes and riding camels or some other unusual, although interesting, means of transportation?

A number of years ago I met a young couple in the midst of grief. His father had just died and I was doing the service because his sister was a member of my church. This couple's grief was intense and overwhelming because not too many weeks before they had experienced

another death when their first child died of AIDS. They had not been churchgoers. They did belong to a couple of twelve step programs. But this grief was too much. In search of some kind of balm they started coming to church.

They were not our typical churchgoers. He wore a long ponytail, before that style came back for men. His typical outfit, including Sunday mornings, was a tie-dye T-shirt and bib overalls. He often arrived on a motorcycle, which fit since he had his own business doing custom work on motorcycles. I've got to tell you that when he first started coming to church, he turned some heads as much as one of the magi on a camel would have.

This couple felt they needed us, but I came quickly to see how much we needed them. They helped us to learn the ways we, without even being aware, made it difficult for seekers to join with us in worship. One simple example was the day Crystal came up to me after worship and said, "What is that thing you people sing when you bring the money forward?" Needless to say, we started printing the Doxology in the bulletin. They helped us to learn a whole lot more over the years, but that's for another time.

Not all people on a spiritual quest are as easily identifiable as magi on camels or someone in a tie-dye T-shirt and bib overalls. Yet, they come into our midst. And sometimes they leave even before we realize they've been here. In just the past couple of months I have had two different people come to my office to effectively ask me the question – Am I welcome here?

Each of them, at very different stages of life's journey are deeply questioning and exploring their faith. They have been worshipping with us for a while, but are uneasy about how open they can be about their own journeys and their own beliefs. They have questions about what the words of our scriptures and our tradition really mean. On their own, one person was reading Marcus Borg's book, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*, and the other had just finished Elaine Pagels' *Gnostic Gospels*. They weren't sure how open our community is to that kind of exploration. I told them I thought they were in just the right place since we represent a range of intellectual understandings of our theological tradition and we seek to be respectful of one another's beliefs.

I also pointed out to them that in the Congregational and UCC tradition we live in the conviction that we love God not only with all our heart and soul, but also with all our mind. We believe as Pastor Robinson said to those first pilgrims heading out from Europe, "There is more light and truth to yet break forth from God's Holy Word."

If the church isn't a place where we can ask questions of faith and spiritual seeking, then I think we have strayed from the Way of Jesus. In the days and years ahead, may we engage ourselves, and the sojourners who come into our midst, in the quest to know the light of God in the Babe in Bethlehem and the presence of the Risen Christ.