

**January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2023**

## **Matthew 2:1-22 “We Keep Seeking”**

Last month on the second Sunday of Advent, I said something like, “Christmas wouldn’t be nearly as fun as it is now if not for the Pagans.” Before I launch into this week’s scripture lesson, I feel like I need to revisit that statement because a lot of people don’t understand what it means to be “pagan.” It’s no secret that a lot of our Christmas traditions are borrowed from pagans. Yule logs, advent wreaths, Christmas trees, Christmas stockings, exchanging gifts, “decking the halls” with boughs of holly, Christmas caroling, the visual image of Santa Claus, the date we celebrate Christmas and just about anything mentioned in the song, “The Twelve Days of Christmas.” All of these traditions are borrowed from *Northern European* pagan traditions. Over the years these traditions became standard practice in our culture and even worldwide. But paganism isn’t just limited to the Germanic and Scandinavian tribes that *we’re* most familiar with. The term “pagan” comes from the Latin word “paganus” which means “rustic” or “rural,” which we might, at best, call “folksy” and at the worst call “hillbilly” or “backwoods.” It was kind of a derogatory term that Christians in the 4<sup>th</sup> century used to identify people in the Roman Empire who practiced any kind of ethnic religions other than Judaism or Christianity. It

wasn't until recently that some people started self-identifying as "pagan." It's like they said, "You know what? We're sick of y'all calling us pagans as if it were an insult. Fine. You want to call me a pagan because I'm not Christian or Jewish? Go right ahead. We're pagan and proud. We're going to be capital 'p' Pagans now." See, Methodists, Quakers, Baptists and Mormons did the same thing. "You wanna call us insulting names? Fine. Let's just make it official." Come to think of it, "Christian" was an insulting label that the Romans used to identify Jesus' followers. And it stuck!

So let's talk about pagans, because it's Epiphany Sunday and Epiphany is all about pagans. Really? Yes, really. The magi who came to Jerusalem inquiring about the Christ-child were pagans. So does that mean that we need to find a nativity set that has wise men adorned in animal skins, sporting Nordic tribal tattoos as they brought gifts of mistletoe and ale to the Christ-child? No. Again, pagans are simply those who practice a religious tradition other than Christianity or Judaism. Some say that the magi were "wise men" meaning philosophers or scholars. Some say they were alchemists or astrologers. Our opening song this morning was, "We Three Kings" because some mistakenly believe that they were royalty. I'm going to set that one aside, though, and we'll tackle that next week for "Epiphany Sunday Part II." Most scholars agree that they were probably Zoroastrians which

is an obscure, ancient pre-Christian, pre-Judaism religion that was monotheistic ... that is, they believed in one god, Ahura Mazda. As I've said before, monotheism wasn't the norm during that period of time, so that was kind of strange. They also believed in free will, judgement after death, angels, and the need for a messiah to deliver the world from evil. They shared similar beliefs, but, again, they were pagans. They were "other." They were that "weird little religion over there in the land of the Persians." But they were first and foremost *seekers*, and they were important enough to be included in Matthew's gospel. What did they seek? They sought wisdom, they sought the divine, they sought fortunes to tell the future. And their seeking led them to Jesus, the child king of a culture and a religion that wasn't theirs. Their seeking is also what protected them against King Herod's deception and harm. So "seeking" is what Epiphany is all about in the church. Epiphany isn't until this coming Friday, which is 12 days after Christmas, but we'll be celebrating it this Sunday and a little next Sunday since technically the "season of epiphany" lasts until February 22<sup>nd</sup> when we start Lenten Season.

Let's talk about the word "epiphany." We use this term when we're explaining an illuminating discovery or a realization or disclosure. The word is the same in both Latin and Greek. "Epiphania" is most commonly translated as "manifest" or "to manifest." If you want to

get down to the mechanics of the word, “Epi” is a preposition that means “upon” and “phania” means “shine.” For these pagans from the east, the revelation of the Christ child was manifested through a star that appeared to them when they were still in their homeland. And that star “shined upon” the Christ child. That’s why it’s called “epiphany.” But that word isn’t in the text though ... that’s just the name that the church assigned to this event. And the way the church traditionally interprets this story is, “God can use people from different religious traditions to affirm that God is a God for all peoples, tribes, and nations.” But you all know that already because I’ve told you that for the last 15 years. What I want to do this week is zero in on this notion of *seeking* and what that means for us. Let’s see if we can discover what the magi can teach us about being a seeker who is persistently seeking that which is sacred. Let’s ask, “In our seeking, what do we hope God will reveal?”

In their seeking, the magi found that the Christ-child was the incarnation of God on earth. They gave gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to the Christ-child, but they *received* a gift too. They discovered that this divine incarnation was available to *everyone* and that it has the power to change the world. But, as is often the case, we humans don’t know what to do with a gift that is freely given and available to all. We’re suspicious, and rightly so. At what point in your life did you discover that

nothing is free? Is it when you thought you had a chance to win a “free car” if you take that key that you received in the mail from the local car dealership and bring it down to the lot to see if it fits a spiffy new car? Okay, maybe that’s not a good example. That’s more like gambling. You’re taking a chance on the *possibility* of getting something for free. Plus, what they don’t tell you is that even if that key does fit, you’ve got to pay tax, title, tags and maintenance. Plus a salesperson is going to do anything in their power to get you to buy something better!

Okay, so what about the time share salespeople who say, “Everyone who comes in just to hear about what we have to offer gets a free dinner or free movie tickets?” There’s no gambling here. It’s not a lottery or a raffle. Everyone gets a dinner. But is it *really* free? The price you pay is a high-pressure sales pitch and a lifetime of junk mail, both in your physical mailbox *and* your e-mail in-box. Plus, they’ll sell your contact information to other businesses who will bombard you with junk mail until the day you die. When you factor in how much your time is worth, was it *really* such a good deal at the end of the day? Maybe it was. Maybe the meal was worth it. But the meal wasn’t free was it?

I think this is why we have a hard time with the idea of God’s grace freely given. Because we, and when I say

we, I mean the church, wants to make the gospel into a tit-for-tat achievement contest where “the one with the most willpower wins.” Richard Rohr in his book *Breathing Underwater* writes, “Grace is always a humiliation for the ego.” He believes that the church has failed to deliver the good news about God’s grace and that this has robbed people of a vital spiritual experience. We have often reduced the gospel down to some fast-food religion that is devoid of any deep transformation of the self. We see this a lot in formerly Christian countries in Europe. Without a transformation of the self, the church ends up being transformed by the dominant culture rather than being the agent of change in the culture. Think about how many formerly Christian countries have become consumer-oriented, proud, warlike, racist, class conscious, and addictive. Yikes Jesse, what do you mean, “formerly Christian countries?” This kind of sounds like us! Well ... that’s certainly something to think about that’s for sure. Rohr also writes that when religion does not move people to a mystical level of consciousness it becomes more of a problem than a solution. At this level, it is largely incapable of its supreme task of healing, reconciling, forgiving, and peace making. When religion does not give people an inner life or any real prayer life, it is missing its primary vocation. Okay. Sounds like we’ve got some work to do then. Sounds like we need to do some seeking. Sounds like we need an epiphany.

We are the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Several years ago, under the leadership of our former General Minister and President Sharon Watkins, we identified three characteristics of what it means to be a disciple – True community, a passion for justice, and deep Christian spirituality. Sharon encouraged Disciple congregations to seek and discover these three things. As a movement, we are involved in all sorts of justice work. We're pretty good at talking about community too. Where we have some work to do is in the realm of deep spirituality. And not the kind of surface-level spirituality that devolves into some sort of contest to see who can be "the most spiritual." Spirituality ... deep Christian spirituality to be more precise ... is a way of life that relates who we are to who God is as revealed in Jesus Christ and as experienced through the Holy Spirit. This is where we learn to encourage one another in the spiritual disciplines and practices through which we open ourselves to being shaped by God. We're talking about prayer, Bible study, worship, stewardship, service and hospitality to strangers to name just a few. That sounds like a good way to prepare ourselves for Lenten season doesn't it? Let's take a look at an Old Testament perspective on epiphany next week and then we can take these beautiful pagan-inspired decorations down and do some inner-work!