

## ***The Reverend Gray Lesesne***

Sermon preached at Good Samaritan Episcopal Church

Annual Meeting Sunday, January 6, 2019

Feast of the Epiphany

*In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage."*

The bright star that the three wise men see shining in the distant night sky over Bethlehem is something so unusual, so different, so radiant and resplendent, that Matthew tells us this star actually compels them to go seek out what exactly it is illuminating. The tradition is that these three wise men are kings or royalty, but that is probably just a sentimental notion or old wives tale that we keep telling ourselves; in fact, scholars can find no credible sources in the Bible or anywhere else to back up that claim. The idea that these wise men are kings may come from the word *magi*...this word is often confused with majesterium or its Latin root *maisetas*. However, the root word for magi, *magus*, is more accurately associated with the word magic. Magi is actually a name for itinerant magicians and travelling entertainers. We like the idea that the wise and mighty kings of the world would come and bow down before the infant son of God born in a manger. More challenging to us is the idea that a group of magicians, gypsies, artists, or yahoo-free-spirits would somehow find their way to the Son of God by being bold enough to follow the light of a bright star shining in the distance.

When you think about it, there's actually something a lot more interesting, more mysterious, more compelling and more heartwarming about wandering, starving artists and entertainers who see a bright star and decide to follow it on a whim (or was it a spiritual hunch?), which leads them to encounter this child who is a so-called King, but born in a manger, and then they give that child king all that they have (for the gold, frankincense, and myrrh would amount to nothing lost for a group of rich royalty, but they would be the entire life savings of a traveling magician or entertainer).

As is the case with so many other Gospel stories, these magi are the most unlikely of suspects who seek out and have an encounter with the Holy One. In the culture of their time, they are nothing other than outcasts, fools, irrelevants, for they are not among the religious elite or part of the so-called "in crowd." Yet Matthew tells us these magicians, fools, entertainers, outcasts...are among the very first disciples to seek out and to find the Son of God. They are the very first to serve the newborn King Jesus by offering him the very best that they have, truly giving gifts that cost them everything. They are the first to take a risk for Jesus by putting themselves in jeopardy when they listen to their dreams and ignore Herod's summons for them to return and explain to him what is going on.

Here's the 10,000 foot view of this story: God picks who society would otherwise call the outliers, the cast offs, the "others", and then invites them to come and see what God is up to through a bright, shiny object. They are curious enough to follow and overwhelmed with joy when they discover what God is doing, so overwhelmed that they decide to serve someone vulnerable and in need (in this case, the child in need happens to be God himself), and from this brave spiritual act, they are called to take an even bigger risk.

I don't know if you if you're seeing the same pattern I am, but this isn't this Epiphany story the story of the people of Good Samaritan, too? Now, with the exception of our lovely artists here on the altar, few of us are travelling musicians or artists. However, we do have a couple of exceptional magicians

and entertainers among our Good Sam's Kids and Youth. (Eli Addis is glad to show you some card tricks after worship today. Ask him about it.) However, all of us, in some way or another, are these magi. We are different from what the world would call "normal" (not that there is a normal, but still). None of us here fits the cookie cutter mold. The beautiful part of Good Samaritan is the crazy Sacred Tapestry that we comprise. Young and old, urban and suburban, singles, couples, families of all kinds, political liberals and conservatives and moderates who can all work, pray, and talk with each other. Some old school Episcopalians who decided to chuck the stained glass and incense to try something new, others of us with spouses who are Jewish or Muslim, at least one of us a Quaker, many of us have no religious background at all. We are rich and poor, people of color, and educated with degrees of many kinds and with practical experience that no degree could ever match.

If you had told me four years ago that more than 150 people with this much diversity and mix would have come together to follow a bright shiny star shining over Hendricks County, I would have probably wouldn't have believed you. And yet, each of you saw a bright star rising in the East (or, er, um, West?), and you decided God might be up to something new in your life and you decided to follow that star. That star led you to a new community of faith without walls, and like these three wise people in today's Gospel story, you were so overwhelmed with joy at what you found when you arrived, you chose to serve people who are vulnerable, people who are in need, people who are in the margins. Each of you has dug deeply into your treasure chests and brought forth your own gold, frankincense, and myrrh, offering both your spiritual gifts and your gifts of time and money to make this community happen. Each of you, like these magi, has chosen to listen to your dreams, and to be a part of a journey on a new road, to take a risk in trying something new.

Here are some things for us to celebrate from the past year as we are gathered here under this bright star this morning.

- We have outgrown two worship spaces and are getting tight many Sundays in our current worship space. For those of you who go by the numbers, our Sunday attendance has increased over the last year by almost 18%, from 86.6 to 96.6. Most "normal" churches are lucky if they don't decline in numbers and are happy to stay even. We grew 18% because you invited friends and neighbors, hung door hangers, posted about us on Facebook, and welcomed new people when they walked in the door. Thank you.
- This means that our capability and capacity to serve after worship has increased, too. Our outreach team is figuring out how our service projects now have to be scaled...what used to take us an hour after worship with 30 or 40 people is now done in a few minutes with 100+ people. (They are up for the challenge and are working on this, as Lucy will share with you in a moment.)
- Your generous increase in pledged giving during 2018 helped us receive a \$90,000 matching gift from our sister congregations of Christ Church Cathedral, Trinity, and St. Paul's here in Indianapolis. This helps us with a much gentler landing as we wean ourselves off of our start-up grants.
- Our Love Your Neighbor campaign has led to more than 5,000 hits on our webpage, helped us deepen our relationships with partners in ministry such as the Equality Alliance at Brownsburg High School and Hendricks County Alliance for Diversity, and helped us get our message out that there is an open, inclusive, welcoming church that serves here in this neighborhood.
- Our Racial Reconciliation and Healing group engaged in a profound first round of work together, asking ourselves some really tough questions about our own biases and privileges.

I want to pause here and to simply say: thank you. What an amazing journey we've had together so far. When I had the idea for Good Sam's about five years ago, I sketched out on a piece of scratch paper a vision for a new community that was creative, diverse, service-focused, and that, frankly, stuck out, in the best sort of way, like a sore thumb (scratch that, bright shining star) as a sign of God's grace and all inclusive love and hope in a world that seemed increasingly isolated and divided. My practical side told me, "This has been a nice idea to flush out on a piece of paper, but it is too risky. Stay at the Cathedral where you have a nice income and a cushy endowment." But in my dreams, I believed this sort of community was possible. I believed that there was this group of magi, magic people, who could come together and create something new, if only a bright new idea, a bright new light could bring them together. The bright light is and has been God, and the bright people are you. Being your priest and pastor is the highest honor of my 17 year ministry, and even if we were to call it a day right here and now and say, "this has been a fun experiment," I would be the most grateful priest in the entire Episcopal Church. But, but....like the magi, given your generosity and your commitment to serve the vulnerable as if you were serving the Christ child himself, you and I have discovered the strong roots of a new community over these past three years together. And like the magi, we are choosing to listen to our dreams and to journey on a new road together.

So, what's ahead for us on this new road together? And how do a group of magi, magic people, begin a journey on a new road? They take a next step together. Friends, I'm excited to announce that the time has come for Good Samaritan to Take The Next Step. (Show Next Step slide.) Your Bishop's Committee and I have worked on six next steps for us in 2019. Here they are:

- (Slide 1) **We'll develop a solid, sustainable plan for moving to a regular gathering space/place when our Harris Academy lease ends in August 2021.** The Brownsburg Community School Corporation loves having us at Harris Academy, but they have a firm policy of not renting to churches beyond a five year lease period. We've asked for an exception to the rule, and while they'd love to do this, if they make an exception for one, they have to make an exception for all. Kevin Samples will be sharing with you in a moment our goal of developing a solid plan for moving to a regular space or gathering place by August 2021.
- (Slide 2) **We'll support our priest, taking the next step toward fully funding his salary, and we'll nurture his spiritual development so he can continue to help lead us in this adventure.** We are blessed that the 45 other congregations in the Diocese of Indianapolis have been and are supporting the start-up work of Good Samaritan by funding my salary so that I can lead you. In 2019, Good Sam's begins to step up to paying 25% of my salary, and we will have an opportunity for me to work on nourishing my own spiritual development so that I can continue to nourish and serve you. Lara Dreyer will share more in a moment about this with you.
- (Slide 3) **We'll deepen our commitment to stand with and for people in the margins in the neighborhoods we serve.** When we stood with the students of the Equality Alliance in June of last year in their work for inclusion of all people, we discovered a significant source of energy and part of our call. As Lucy Karam will share in her outreach ministry update, we want to do more of this.
- (Slide 4) We'll engage in another round of **Racial Healing and Reconciliation** work. We intentionally chose to start small, and in 2019, we'd like to draw the circle wider. We plan to create more opportunities in different settings and times for racial reconciliation work, so that if you can't make a small group on a Wednesday night, you still get to be a part.
- (Slide 5) We'll continue to **invest in children's and youth formation**, nurturing our young people in a life of love and service. Barbie Russell and Erina Ludwig are only quarter time on the books, but I can tell you: they give a lot more than that to lead our children and youth. They are both building great teams, and our children's ministry is bursting at the seams. Barbie

is almost ready for a third classroom, and she's got a great batch of soon-to-be middle schoolers. Meanwhile, Erina is helping to set a great culture among our middle and high school youth, preparing the way for exponential growth as Barbie's middle schoolers come of age next fall.

- (Slide 6) **We'll deepen our focus on key outreach partnerships with Brownsburg Food Pantry, Harris Academy, Family Promise, and Sheltering Wings, working on more in-person connections with people in need.** In a speech to a Memphis crowd of striking sanitation workers on the day before he was assassinated, Martin Luther King, Jr. had some profound last public words: "We are called to play the Good Samaritan on life's roadside; but that will be only an initial act. One day the whole Jericho road must be transformed so that men and women will not be beaten and robbed as they make their journey through life. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it understands that an edifice that produces beggars needs restructuring." The work we've done in outreach to this point has been wonderful, and helpful. But we are now feeling God calling us to go deeper, into relationships with the people we serve, moving from giving and serving doing for other to giving and serving and doing with others. Only when we know the people we serve in deep relationship will we be ready to engage in the deeper work of transforming the whole Jericho road. Lucy will share a bit more about this, too, in a moment.

Notice that while there are a few steps we're taking that will help us as a congregation, that the great majority of the next big steps we are taking are still outwardly focused or help us organize ourselves so that we can be even more outwardly focused. The temptation for a new church our size is to say "Hey, we've made it! We've got about 100 people on a Sunday, and this feels cozy. Circle the wagons and let's become a private club and build a clubhouse." But that isn't who we are. That isn't the way of the magi who followed a bright light and chose to serve a vulnerable child. That isn't listening to our dreams and following a new road to journey to a new place.

One other point: These six priorities aren't the work our Bishop's Committee and I will be doing for you on your behalf. This is the work of all of us, all the magi, the magic people, are called to do together, on the road, all taking the next step together. As many of you have heard me say by now, Good Samaritan is not a spectator congregation. If you come here, if you choose to be part of us, we ask and expect you to serve with us, to be an active part of our life and ministry, to be a part of the conversations, and to participate in the work God calls all of us to do through giving of your time, talent, and treasure.

This week, you will receive in your mail an invitation to Take The Next Step with us in 2019. We're asking you for three things: your prayers, a gift of pledged financial support in 2019, and a gift of your time and talent.

We've been so blessed through the generosity of the people of the Episcopal Church to receive two start-up grants over the last three years. One of these grants, from the Diocese of Indianapolis, continues to fund a portion of my salary through 2021 as Good Sam's steps up to fully fund my position. The other start-up grant from the larger Episcopal Church, which covered items such as rent and staff salaries, ended in 2018. The people of Good Sam's now have the opportunity to **Take The Next Step toward fully funding our 2019 common expenses for ministry**, with a pledge goal of \$200,000. We know that asking for \$200,000 in annual giving is a lofty, but attainable goal that will help us take a giant leap to fund Good Samaritan's ministry in 2019. Financial giving is a way we can express our gratitude to God for our new community, celebrate and grow our ministries together, and help the Episcopal Church plant more new congregations like ours. I'm inviting each of our 88 households to **Take The Next Step** in your giving as an act of your discipleship in Jesus Christ, your

faith in what God has in store next for us, and as a sign of thanksgiving for this community we share in Christ. Your Bishop's Committee and I are all in; we have already pledged a total of \$35,380 toward this goal.

I'll be completely honest: the doubter, nervous Nellie part of me (you're shocked, I know!) has been hesitant at times and wondered if we will be able to do this. A couple of weeks ago, Teresa, my church planting coach, finally challenged me: "Gray," she asked, "How many times before on this journey have you doubted and wondered if this would all come to fruition, only to be surprised and overwhelmed by God and the people of Good Samaritan that you serve, who have always come through with abundance beyond your wildest dreams?"

It's true, Good Samaritans. You and God have awed and surprised me over and over with your abundant joy, passion for serving and including others, and commitment to make a new community here on the west side of Indy that truly is beyond my wildest dreams. Like that ragtag band of wide-eyed, star-seeking travelers, you have chosen to come along with me to meet God, the Christ-child, in the vulnerable places and people of this neighborhood. Together, we have served them and opened our treasure chests, offering our many talents and gifts. Together, we've taken a risk and formed a new community that loves, serves, and includes all people...no exceptions. And now, magi people, God is inviting us to listen to our dreams, and to take the next step, together. God is inviting us to participate in God's magic of redeeming and transforming this broken world into the beautiful world God envisioned from the beginning of time.

Today, we join these three magicians, these wise people, these rogues, these outcasts, in kneeling down before a Savior that brings us overwhelming joy. This God-made-human, this child in a manger who becomes a king, this rabbi who changes the world with his teachings, loves each of us so much, that he offers himself for us as a gift of grace and hope. As we pay him homage, we continue on this incredible journey together, on a new road that takes us to new places as we listen to the call of God to become magicians working in concert with God. It is a high honor and a joy to be your priest. It is an incredible honor and joy to work with such talented staff as Patrick, Kendall, Erina, Barbie, and Erica, along with our honorary clergy associates Yvonne, Cal, and Andrea. It is an honor to work with so many of you, who are the most talented and capable people of God I've known. And now we all take the next steps on this journey together, full of gratitude for all that has already been, and with excitement and anticipation for the loving, the serving, the including that is to come.