

*The Magi set out on a trip that would change them forever.  
Each of us is challenged to do the same.*  
—Richard Rohr, O.F.M.

## **The Magi's Journey and Our Own**

### **Welcome**

Rev. Clare Petersberger

### **The Covenant**

(Read in unison)

L. Griswold Williams

**LOVE IS THE DOCTRINE OF THIS CHURCH,  
THE QUEST OF TRUTH IS ITS SACRAMENT,  
AND SERVICE IS ITS PRAYER.**

**TO DWELL TOGETHER IN PEACE,  
TO SEEK KNOWLEDGE IN FREEDOM,  
TO SERVE HUMAN NEED,  
TO THE END THAT ALL SOULS SHALL  
GROW INTO HARMONY WITH THE DIVINE—  
THUS DO WE COVENANT WITH EACH OTHER  
AND WITH GOD.**

### **Opening Words**

Our spiritual question for January is, “What does it mean to be a people of possibility?”

The beginning of a new year is an excellent time to wonder about the possibilities for our lives. To this end, The Reverend Gretchen Haley asks:

If you had the chance to start again  
to make your life from scratch  
to decide what sort of person you would be  
who you would love, and how  
the content of your days, your hours  
what songs would you sing to yourself,  
or with others?  
What prayers would you let fall from your lips  
urgently and with praise, with mercy, or hope?  
What blessings would you name  
and share,  
with strangers, and friends?  
If you could take now that first step  
what journey would you begin  
across deserts, or mountains -

or would you take to the sky,  
which, despite the bitter cold  
is still vast, and filled with light?  
What work would you take,  
what mischief would you make  
with boldness, and bravery,  
what failure would you embrace, and  
what would you release,  
and where  
in the end,  
would you return, and call home?  
In this new day  
on the beginning of a new year  
no magic wishing or wondering  
is required  
for such a chance  
is always available  
As with the in, and out of our breath  
to begin now  
to live like we mean it  
to see with new eyes  
the life that is already and always  
available,  
to respond to this gift  
with wonder,  
and gratitude  
to join in this partnership  
to tend this flame  
even when it breaks our heart  
to keep showing up  
to go with courage  
into this dawning day.  
Come, let us worship  
together.

## **Chalice Lighting**

(Read in unison)

Adapted from The Rev. Julianne Lepp

**WE SEEK OUR PLACE IN THE WORLD  
AND THE ANSWERS TO OUR HEARTS' DEEP  
QUESTIONS.**

**AS WE SEEK, MAY OUR HEARTS BE OPEN  
TO UNEXPECTED ANSWERS.**

**MAY THE LIGHT OF OUR CHALICE REMIND US  
THAT THIS IS A COMMUNITY OF WARMTH, OF WISDOM,  
AND OF WELCOME.**

**Prelude**

“Everything Possible”

Fred Small

Patty Barry, voice; Tracy Hall, piano

**Story**

*Baboushka and the Three Kings*

Ruth Robbins

Our story is about a journey in search of love. It is the story of Baboushka and the Three Kings.

“Long ago and far away, on a winter’s evening, the wind blew hard and cold around a small hut. Inside the hut, Baboushka was sweeping and scrubbing, and feeding wood to the stove. The old woman took pride in the clean comfort of her meager home. The swirling snow drifted and deepened outside. Baboushka’s hut felt snug around her; her warm stove was the center of a cold world.”

[As the story begins, Baboushka’s cozy evening is interrupted by the arrival of three kingly figures, magnificently dressed and riding in a splendid horse-drawn sleigh ahead of a caravan of men on horseback and on foot. But the caravan is lost, the noblemen explain to Baboushka, and they need her help in finding the newborn babe whom they seek to honor with gifts and exultation at his birth. But Baboushka declines their entreaties; she has work to do, she explains, but will happily lead them once the daylight reappears. They are invited to rest with her as they await the dawn.

The strangers decline her invitation, choosing to go on seeking the baby. The caravan moves on, and Baboushka completes her chores. But her heart is filled with tenderness for the baby, and she, too, decides to bring him her gifts. She makes ready to leave at dawn, intending to follow the trail of the caravan.

But the snow has obscured their trail, and no one can respond to her inquiries about the baby, whom she hopes to honor with her gifts. She persists, going from village to village, seeking the baby and finding no information as to his whereabouts. The story concludes: “So she left her gifts for the children she HAD seen. And it is said that every year, at the season when news of the birth of the Child was first shared, Baboushka renews her search across the land with new hope. And it is said that every year little children await the coming of Baboushka. they find joy in the poor but precious gifts she leaves behind her in the silent night.”]

**Hymn**

#259 “We Three Kings of Orient Are”

## **Meditation**

“For Those Who Have Far to Travel”

Jan Richardson

If you could see  
the journey whole  
you might never  
undertake it;  
might never dare  
the first step  
that propels you  
from the place  
you have known  
toward the place  
you know not.

[The poem continues, describing the blessing of having a road reveal itself only in stages, so we must earn it, step by step as does a pilgrim, watching for signs and wonders along the way. The poem concludes,

each choice creates  
the road  
that will take you  
to the place  
where at last  
you will kneel to offer the gift  
most needed—  
the gift that only you  
can give—  
before turning to go  
home by  
another way. ]

## **Musical Interlude**

*We Are the Rain and the Rainbow*

Cynthia Crossen

TUUC Choir

## **Reading**

“The Journey of the Magi”

T. S. Eliot

Today Christian churches are celebrating Epiphany—the day the Magi finally arrived in Bethlehem and discovered the child. In 1927, T. S. Eliot thought about this journey. He wrote, “I had been thinking about it in church and when I got home I opened a half-bottle of Booth’s gin, poured myself a drink and began to write. By lunchtime the poem, and the half-bottle of gin, were both finished.” Eliot began his poem using lines from a sermon given by Bishop Lancelot Andrewes in 1622, about a decade after the King James

translation of the Bible had been published. In his sermon, the Bishop said, “A cold coming they had of it at this time of the year, just the worst time of the year to take a journey, and specifically a long journey. The ways deep, the weather sharp the days short, the sun farthest off, in *solstitio brumali*, the very dead of winter.”

Eliot altered these words by speaking not ABOUT the Magi but imagining one of the magi as the speaker. His poem becomes a first-hand account of a spiritual journey.

The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowen Williams, observed, “Eliot never wanted to present religious faith as a nice cheerful answer to everyone’s questions, but as an inner shift so deep that you could hardly notice it, yet giving a new perspective on everything, and a new restlessness, (new possibilities) in a tired and chilly world.”

So as you listen to Eliot’s Journey of the Magi, feel where you are on your own spiritual journey.

“A cold coming we had of it,  
Just the worst time of the year  
For a journey, and such a long journey:  
The ways deep and the weather sharp,  
The very dead of winter.”

[The poem continues with a description of the surly camels and their drivers, and the thoughts of the pleasures of summer palaces left behind as they trek in the snow through inhospitable cities and towns. Finding it easier to travel by night, napping only briefly, they wonder at their own folly. But they descend into a valley, warm and wet without snow, and find a tavern at which their request for information is unmet. But they journey on, and find their destination, finding it ‘satisfactory.’ The speaker ruminates on the meaning of the journey before concluding thus:

I had seen birth and death,  
But had thought they were different;  
this Birth was  
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.

We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,  
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,  
With an alien people clutching their gods.  
I should be glad of another death.”]

So the magi realizes he is no longer at ease with the old dispensation—and that the death of the old gives birth to new possibilities. How does this resonate with your own spiritual journey? How does this resonate with the spiritual seekers you have met in this community?

## **Stewardship Testimonial**

Tim Boniface

I first came to TUUC during a rather bad case of cabin fever following a particularly harsh snowstorm. I didn’t care about religion or spirituality. I didn’t even know what Unitarian Universalism was, outside of a

brief mention in an economics class, but that is another story all together. I just needed to get out, and from looking at the website TUUC appeared civic-oriented.

I remember sitting next to Alan and Marilyn Thorn. They were one of the first people that struck up a conversation with me and encouraged me to keep coming back and ease into the church at my own pace. I'm very grateful to TUUC, because all your passions and efforts have influenced me to grow into a better person.

Barry Marsh and Jay Hauf's passion for health care, convinced me to become a regular blood donor. Shelia Malenski and Monica Sweidel's efforts, among so very many others, to uplift the underprivileged, encouraged me to be more generous to others and observant of the world around me. All the volunteers that I see at every event, whose stalwart efforts to maintain this church encourage me to do the same.

Thanks to the Lay Worship Associates, I have become more confident, articulate, and less socially anxious. You all have taught me new perspectives, subjects, and issues that I never would have recognized or considered otherwise.

And you have done the same for me, by greeting me every Sunday and humoring my nerdy introspections whenever I come up to this microphone. Thank you all for helping this church become my spiritual home.

## **Offertory**

“You Are the New Day”

John David/P. Knight, arr.

TUUC Choir

## **Sermon**

*The Magi's Journey and Our Own*

Rev. Clare L. Petersberger

The story of the wise people following a star, making a long journey in search of the holy, being overjoyed at discovering divinity born in a baby, and receiving a warning in a dream to go home by another route has always been one of my favorites in the nativity story. I don't know much about tending sheep and even less about seeing and hearing an angel of the Lord proclaim the birth of a savior. But gazing at stars in the night sky? Remembering dreams? Seeking meaning? All these ring true to my lived experience.

Much of what we think we know about the Persian priests who followed a star to worship the holy baby in Bethlehem came much later. Today we sang “We Three Kings.” But the original story does not specify that the Magi were kings. It does not even specify that there were three Magi! All it says is that Magi from the east came to Jerusalem because they saw a star. The story does report that the Magi presented three gifts to the baby: gold, incense, and myrrh. And it does say that having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned another way. Much of what we think we know about the original story are later additions—including the names of the Magi: Melchior, Casper, and Balthazar.

The story, itself, is simple. Foreigners followed a star to find where it shone on a baby who would become a great leader. They were overjoyed when they arrived, presented gifts; and returned home by a different route. Of course, it could not have been that simple because no human journey is that simple. Almost four hundred years ago, Bishop Lancelot Andrewes imagined the difficulties of the journey of the Magi: “A cold coming

they had of it at this time of the year, just the worst time of the year to take a journey, and specifically, a long journey.”

Just over 90 years ago, T. S. Eliot imagined this difficult journey in even more specific terms:

“. . . camel men cursing and grumbling  
and running away, and wanting their liquor and women,  
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,  
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly  
And the villages dirty and charging high prices.”

When you hear T. S. Eliot read his poem, the “And the . . . and the . . . and the . . .” sounds like one is going up and down on a camel, plodding along interminably. The Magi had left warmth, and women serving sherbet, a Persian soft drink, and were being sorely tested by the grumbling and disagreements of the camel men, by the extreme weather and lack of shelter, by the unfriendly people in the cities, by exhaustion, by extortion of the cities and villagers, and by their doubts . . . voices in their heads saying it was all folly.

We can well imagine obstacles on the journey of the Magi—because that is our human experience of journeying through time. And this is why some congregations celebrate Epiphany with a game to get the kings “over field and fountain, moor and mountain” to bring their gifts to the holy Child.

Gertrud Mueller Nelson describes how, in her congregation, a star is used which has a spinning arrow pointing to numbers and setting the fate of the three kings. In each pew there stands a person ready to read the wise people their fate as they wend their way to a symbolic Bethlehem.

“You have sighted the star, advance two pews.”

“Get cactus prickles out from between toes, stay put at this pew.”

“You must water your camels, go back two pews to the nearest oasis.”

“Kindly shepherds point the way. Go forward two pews.”

“Bandits have stolen your gifts; go back three pews and get more frankincense.”

“A sandstorm has covered your path. Wait at this pew.”

“You have lost sight of the star; go back one pew.”

“You’ve rounded a corner and the house is in sight go forward to the altar.”

The congregation cheers their kings along the way and boos when the kings land in Herod’s castle. And when the kings finally arrive in Bethlehem, everyone sings a last refrain of “We Three Kings” while blowing kazoos and banging tins.

This re-enactment of the story of the journey of the magi is a metaphor for our own spiritual journey. Richard Rohr writes, “An epiphany is not an idea. As D. H. Lawrence said, people can do anything they want

with an idea, but a truly new experience changes everything. Before you can do anything with it, it does something with you!" He continues, "Most of us prefer ideas and words; we are afraid of any authentically new experience. Unlike the Magi, we do not tend to allow stars to divert us to a new and unknown place. Most of us stay inside our private castles and avoid such questionable adventures. Yes, we avoid death supposedly, but we also avoid birth. We miss out on the great epiphany."

This is what happened to Baboushka. She was comfortable in her routine at home. She did not initially want to leave the warmth of her home for the unknown cold. But then her heart was touched by the thought of the child and the possibilities foretold by the kings. And she headed out into the world. She did not find THE child. She found many children with whom to share her heart and her gifts. The Magi in T. S. Eliot's poem wondered if the journey was all folly, and had his doubts about making it. In Eliot's poem, even the destination is less exciting; the place—Bethlehem—they found "satisfactory." It was only looking back, in hindsight, that Eliot's Magi realized that inner transformation that had taken place a long time ago. His pithy question, "were we led all this way for Birth or Death?" is one we ask ourselves when we leave home, leave school, leave a job, leave a marriage, or realize we no longer have the same physical abilities that we once had. The loss of former ways of being offer new possibilities for our lives—new opportunities, new relationships, new healthy habits, new revelations.

Frank Turner sings about this in his song entitled "The Journey of The Magi"—which does not just include the wise people from Persia.

Frank sings,  
"Moses was old, a chill in his bones  
Falling apart, he knew in his heart that his time had come  
As he lay in his tent in the hot desert sands  
He smiled at how he would never see his promised land  
He sang, 'I could have lived and died  
An Egyptian prince, could have played safe  
But in the end journey's brought joys  
That outweigh the pain'

Now Odysseus sat tired and alone  
He'd always held out against all the doubts he would come home  
Now he was here, his soul felt estranged  
His wife and his dog, his son and his gods, everything changed  
He sang, 'I could have stayed and ruled  
As an Ithacan prince, could've played safe  
But in the end journey's brought joys  
That outweigh the pain'

Now Balthazar rode for seven long years  
Eastwards and far, he followed his star and it brought him here  
To a stable in ruins in some backwater town  
To a virgin defiled, no king but a child, too small for a crown  
He sang, 'I could have lived with my Gods  
As a Persian prince, I could've played safe

But in the end journey's brought joys  
That outweigh the pain'  
Paupers and kings, princes and thieves  
Singers of songs, righters of wrongs, be what you believe  
Saddle your horse, shoulder your load  
Burst at the seams, be what you dream and then take to the road.”

So if you were Moses, or Odysseus, or the speaker in Eliot’s poem, looking back long ago to an epiphany in your life, what would it be?

What was the journey?

Who was with you?

What were the challenges?

What was the death?

And what was the birth?

Richard Rohr writes of the epiphanies that transform our lives: “As Martin Buber, the Jewish philosopher, put it, *all real living is meeting*. It is fairly easy to discuss and have opinions; it is much harder to be present to another and to *meet* them. The first allows us to maintain ourselves as we are; the second demands surrender and getting ourselves out of the way. The first is the nature of the ego; the second is the nature of the Spirit.”

We Unitarian Universalists are like the Magi in that we seek to follow, if not a star, then epiphanies we do not control that lead us to what is most worthy of our faithful love. We seek the truths that guide and transform us. We offer support and encouragement to others making a similar journey of the spirit through time. We share our gifts with those we meet along the way. We open ourselves to experiences of grace. In so doing, we are transformed.

May such possibilities be ours as we continue our journey together in 2019.

## **Hymn**

#295 “Sing Out Praises for the Journey”

## **Closing Words**

“Blessed Is the Path”

Rev. Eric Williams

Blessed is the path on which you travel.  
Blessed is the body that carries you upon it.  
Blessed is your heart that has heard the call.  
Blessed is your mind that discerns the way.  
Blessed is the gift that you will receive by going.

Truly blessed is the gift that you will become on the journey.

GO NOW IN PEACE.