

From generation to generation, we keep seeking. I graduated seminary in 2007 but wasn't ordained until 2016. Most pastors are ordained on the heels of graduation, but I am not most pastors. Though I had tried to get ordained in the PCUSA, I was told no in 2008, which was devastating, but I keep trying. When we moved back to Columbus in 2009, I nearly got a job at a PCUSA church in town where I could work toward ordination and do youth ministry but came in second to someone else. So, I ended up working at an evangelical megachurch for four years because I needed a salary and healthcare. In those four years, I made good friends and did meaningful ministry, but I was not where I wanted to be.

In my last year at that church, I saw a therapist to work through my disappointment with how my life and ministry were turning out. My theology had changed, and I wanted to pastor a church that upheld the equality of women and the LGBTQ community, but the road from where I was to where I wanted to be seemed impassable. In one of our early sessions, my therapist asked, "Have you had any dreams lately?" I hadn't thought about it, but I had. Then he said something to me I've never forgotten. He said, "Our dreams never lie to us." In one dream, I was walking toward a traditional church building. I wanted so badly to go inside and see that holy place. I knew that inside was what I was seeking. On my way in, there were three men dressed in clergy collars coming from the other direction. One was older, and the other two were younger, and I tried to catch their eyes in the hope that one of them would let me in the church, but none of them would look at me. All I wanted to do was to serve in ministry in a church like this, but I couldn't even get a look from those who held the keys. If I was going to go inside, I would need to let myself in. I had to keep seeking.

As we begin a new year here at Covenant, we begin a new Gospel as well. We spent last year in Luke with Jesus at the Big Table. We saw Jesus expand our understanding of who belongs at God's Table. This year we are in Matthew, and Matthew has his own perspective on Jesus. Matthew is the most Jewish of the four Gospels. He is constantly pointing out how Jesus is the fulfillment of Israel's story, and the story of Israel is a story of seeking, getting lost and being found. In fact, the word, "Israel" means struggles with God, and that's the story Jesus fulfills. It's a story of struggle, seeking, getting lost, and being found, only to start the process all over again.

On the first Sunday of Advent, I preached from Matthew 1, the genealogy of Jesus, where Matthew uplifts five women who we would never expect to find in a royal family tree: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Mary. Several of the women are Gentiles, and all of them have stories we might consider shameful, yet Matthew proudly uplifts them to say, they belong here too. All these women knew struggle, and all of them were seekers. As Matthew's story continues, he introduces more seekers, people we would never guess belong in this story, and yet here they are: "In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi from the east came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star in the east and have come to pay him homage.'" Who were the magi? Our closing hymn calls them three kings from the Orient, and while I love that song and look forward to singing it, the truth is we don't know if there were three, we don't know if they were kings, and they almost certainly weren't from the Orient. Besides all that, it's a great song.

The truth is, we don't know who the magi were. They were mysterious, star gazers from the east who came to Jerusalem, seeking a newborn king. They were astrologers, those who viewed the movements in the night sky as revealing the divine plan. Even though we hear this

story every year, we can never forget how strange this is because the Bible doesn't speak kindly about astrology. The practice is usually associated with the false religions and gods of pagan nations. Deuteronomy 18 tells the Israelites that when they enter the promised land, they are not to imitate the abhorrent practices of nations who lived there. Those practices include sorcery and divination, of which astrology is often associated. Matthew begins the story of the Jewish Messiah with one of the greatest literary ironies of all time, in which a group of pagan, Gentile astrologers who likely don't know anything about Israel's story and scriptures, are the ones who seek to honor the Christ child, while Israel's king and biblical scholars seek to destroy him. We didn't see that one coming. Matthew is letting us know that sometimes it's the people we least expect who know more about God than the so-called experts and keepers of the tradition. Sometimes it's the people we've been told are abhorrent who know more about God than we do.

The magi are seekers, those who are open to discovering God outside of convention, tradition, outside of their own understanding. By being open to God's leading, they end up honoring and protecting the Christ child from those who seek to do him harm. Now, I don't think Matthew includes this story as encouragement to take up astrology. I don't think that's the point. I think he tells us this story right up front, so that we might know that God doesn't belong to any one people or religion, to know that God works outside our categories and our theology. God reveals Godself in ways we do not expect, in our experiences, our dreams, and in unlikely people. Religion that is healthy remains open to the unexpected, while toxic religion assumes it has everything figured out.

Matthew invites us to become seekers, to be open to the surprises of God, to seek God and keep on seeking, to embrace a cultural and religious humility that says, I don't have God figured out, and I don't think anyone else does either. But maybe everyone knows something about God, and we if we are open, we can learn from people we least expect. Seekers make room for surprise and ambiguity, which is where God is always showing up. Herod has no room for either. He only seeks control. People who live for control are beset by fear, even if they appear to be powerful. If we seek control, we'll never find God, because God is never in our control. A God that is under our control is no God at all. But when we seek the God who is, we'll remain open to the unexpected, uncontrollable grace of God.

The story of God is a story of grace, and grace doesn't belong to anyone of us. Grace doesn't abide by our rules. It is not under our control, which if we're honest, we don't like. Often, we are often more like Herod than the magi. We want control, don't we? I do. But God wants us to be free. When we let go of control, we are free to seek and keep seeking, and when we do, Jesus assures us that grace will find us. The magi find what they sought, and when they do, they are overwhelmed with joy. They kneel in awe before this gift of love in the Christ child. Though they bring him gifts, they are the ones who receive the gift of God's grace, Christ himself. This grace changes them, and they cannot remain the same. God warns them in a dream of Herod's plans, so they return home by another road.

In my dream, even though I was ignored by the clergy, I went to the church door and found it was open. I didn't need them to let me in. Inside was everything I imagined, a beautiful, quiet, holy space where God dwelt, and all I wanted was to bask in the divine. Six months after that dream, I found a job at Central College Presbyterian Church. Three years later I was ordained. It took longer than I wanted and still arrived on time. My ordination service

featured a special song from one my favorite bands, Cloud Cult off their album, *The Seeker*. The song says:

May you find grace when overtaken by the tempest.
May you find humor in the cynic and the pessimist.
May you find faith in the Great Unknown.
Lay it all down... in a calm, safe space.
And if the dream doesn't come... just wait

What we discover in the end, is that for all our seeking, it's God who finds us. Ours is a story of struggle, seeking, getting lost, and being found, only to start the process all over again. So, seek and keep on seeking, my friends, and trust that grace will find you. In fact, it already has.