

## **Rooted in Scripture, Following the Star**

### **Matthew 2:1-12 by Patty Friesen**

Perhaps of all the characters of the Christmas story these past six weeks, the wisemen are my favourite. They appear only in Matthew's gospel. Matthew is the Jewish gospel, written to emphasize the Jewishness of Jesus. The promises of Isaiah, of the Jewish exiles returning home from Babylon and the Babylonian kings bringing gold, and frankincense back to Jerusalem after having plundered it decades before would have made Jewish hearts throb. It is a wonderful reversal of fortunes, wealth coming to the poor, worship coming to the lowly, King Herod usurped by a baby.

But Matthew is careful lest the story become a cause for nationalistic pride. First and foremost, the wise men are not Jewish. They are Gentiles, foreigners, unclean pork eaters. It is the Gentiles who are looking for the Messiah in the scriptures and in the stars in the sky, not the Jewish scholars in Jerusalem. Looking back in scripture, the wise ones know that Isaiah 60 promised the new age of God with the coming of light and this light is for all people. They are open to these signs, new stars in the sky that could not be rationally explained. They risk having their neighbours think they are crazy as they leave their comfortable homeland in faith, following the star.

This is a delicate position to be in, looking back in scripture while looking forward to the signs of the times. This is the delicate position our church and conference is in nowadays as we try to be rooted in scripture while following the Christ star with regard to our family members who are gay and want to be baptized, married, parents and participating members of the Mennonite Church.

When Mom phoned to ask what I was doing New Year's Eve and I told her I was doing a prayer at a wedding of two young Mennonite men, it got very quiet on the other end of the telephone line and then she said, "I don't want to talk about it." I told her I needed to tell her about it before she read it in the Canadian Mennonite and she said she was cancelling her subscription to the Canadian Mennonite. Finally, I asked if she would pray for us on New Year Eve and she said she would.

I know this issue raises tension and anger in families and churches and conferences but we have to talk about it and continue praying for each other. I like when people respectfully disagree with me. It makes for such interesting conversation. I respect my Mom's deep faith and love for the Mennonite Church but I also want to share what God is doing in my life and at Osler Mennonite Church. You are stuck with me for only nine more months. She is stuck with me for the rest of her life!

I was raised that homosexuality was wrong according to verses in Leviticus, Romans and 1 Peter, yet I had a kind older minister growing up, Paul Burkholder who pastored Bluesky Mennonite for 40 years and I don't remember him talking about homosexuality. He talked more about Jesus and his golf games. The last coffee Patrick and I had with him before he died, he said that since his granddaughter had come out, it changed how he thought about things.

I didn't think I even knew any gay people growing up, but by the time I was in college in the mid-80's, my cousins started coming out of the closet, unable to keep their identity silent any longer. We had so many cousins come out that we began to wonder about the genetic component of sexual orientation. This included a beloved cousin who was a wonderful singer and brilliant Sunday School teacher and whom I set up with my best girlfriend. Their marriage fell apart after a few years. He said he got married because he believed it would cure him but it didn't. He felt he not only had to leave his marriage but his church where he, his parents, grandparents had worshipped and where our great-grandfather had pastored. It felt like a complete exile.

This family disaster set us on a path we wouldn't have chosen to go down but we have had to hold together the tension between our love of our

gay cousins and our love of the Mennonite Church who in 1986 in Saskatoon reaffirmed that marriage is only allowed between women and men. This duality has caused tension for me personally and in our extended family for decades.

These tensions continued when Patrick and I graduated from seminary and went to co-pastor Faith Mennonite Church in Minneapolis that just had a church split over the welcome of gays in the church. The division split brothers and life-long friends, but also created a lovely new congregation Emmanuel Mennonite. At Faith Mennonite, we felt like we were working with Mennonite Disaster Service that took a whole decade of healing. People continued to jump off at both ends of the issue, some who thought we weren't activist enough and others who thought we were too activist.

In our Central Plains Conference our congregation's vote was taken away and our ministerial credentials were in question because some felt we were in too great a variance of scripture and the confession of faith. We believed the confession of faith was just that a confession of faith, not a creed, not essential to our salvation but a working document for discussion and discernment. We Mennonites have had over a dozen confessions of faith over 500 years, and as Patrick said on Wednesday night, tradition is meant to serve us and help us, we are not meant to be a serve it. But in good

Old Mennonite tradition the conference practiced scolding and shunning and the ultimate punishment, endless meetings! Through all the drama, both Faith and Emmanuel Mennonite Churches continue to grow with young families in the Twin Cities and ironically young people from both congregations have been marrying each other – like Montagues and Capulets! So much for church splits!

Personally I'm still learning from my gay cousins. I am still getting used to the idea of same sex couples marrying and having children in the church. It really stretches the mind and heart and I believe God is at work stretching me in these ways. I've come to understand the welcome of Jesus for marginal people in the gospels and the book of Acts welcoming Gentiles in the early church, particularly God's word to Peter in Acts 10 making unclean things clean, as stronger scriptural basis for our Christian faith and practice than select verses in Leviticus. As Anabaptists we've always held the gospels higher than the rest of the Bible with their emphasis on Jesus and peacemaking. It's been a relief to be in Mennonite Church Saskatchewan where the Pastoral Leadership Commission made the statement last fall that they leave the pastoral care of families of gays and pastors participating in gay weddings up to the discernment of their home congregations; a bottom-up rather than top-down practice that is very Anabaptist.

We won't all agree on this. Some of us have been launched into it because of our relatives and have really had to seek God's will of love for our families. Others of us will never be reconciled with it and are tired of hearing about it. Others of us can't believe the church is so backwards and have no patience with it. The challenge is to live respectfully together despite the spectrum of differences and if we can't, maybe we have to separate for a while like Faith and Emmanuel and let the next generation sort it out.

I'm hopeful and trusting that we will be able to find our way through it. We will find our way through by humbly hearing the personal faith testimonies of Mennonite parents and their gay children and asking for their patience as we struggle through our own discomfort and prayerful discernment. Even if we absolutely disagree with everything they say, even more than ever, we have to be praying for our church, our conference leadership and those with whom we disagree, like my mom and I pray for each other.

The wise men demonstrate a spirit of faithfulness that is rooted in tradition and scripture but is also open to dreams and signs and new interpretations of what is going on in the world. They demonstrate a spirit of Christ that is ready to leave everything in order to go places they have never

been before, at the minimal cost of appearing foolish to their neighbours and the maximum cost of their lives. May we also be wise, rooting ourselves in scripture and prayer, while following the Christ star, looking for how God is leading us in this new year.

Let us pray...Holy Jesus, before your infant form sages bowed the knee and acknowledged your lordship over all power and wisdom. Grant us also clear vision and courage, that in the light of your light we may devote our power and potential to your service, even when that requires us to go home by another way. Amen.