

It's a long journey for the magi. Walking, maybe riding camels for hundreds of miles, many weeks. Lots of time to observe, question, ponder together, get even wiser along the way. That's good, because when they meet Herod it takes all their wits to discern what's right. Herod's fear reflects how others felt about him. He's a mean dude. Ruthless. Selfish. Cutthroat conniving. Calling secretly for the magi and sending them with a façade of faith, to serve as spies in his genocide. You see, "the time of King Herod" is more than a date. It's dark shadows of Tolkein's Mordor. Chill of Harry Potter's dementors. Horrors of Hitler, Khmer Rouge, Saddam Hussein, threats still menacing Cameroon, Mali, Syria, Afghanistan, Palestine, places in our country, our community. Yet, overcome with joy, the magi enter, kneel, open their treasure. And in the end, it's about what they don't do next as much as homage to Jesus—revealing what's true about him and them and Herod. Warned in dream (code in the Bible for God speaking), they discern not to return to Herod. They go home by another road. At the end, a new beginning.

It's a long journey for the magi in mind and heart as much as on foot. Discernment. Friends, it's a journey we're always on, as well. What's right and wrong? What do I desire and resist? Meaning, purpose, joy, making a difference ... on our journey of living faith, sometimes in poignant moments or experiences, questions seem bigger, longings deeper, if not always clearer. We turn a New Year and maybe make resolutions—diets, workout routines, other priorities and plans and dreams. We face transitions in work. Children age and we enter new parenting stages. We receive a

new diagnosis, for better or worse. Life constantly changing. And after disturbing events in our Capitol less than 24 hours before we record this service ... Friends, we didn't get here overnight. It's an accumulation of many momentary decisions, actions, expressions ... so it will be—all of us individually and collectively as a nation. How do we discern and decide where we go from here?

Whatever they perceive about Herod and Bethlehem, the magi sense enough to pose questions to pierce surface illusions. Whatever people knew about Jesus, or not, the gospels are all about unveiling of Holy Love in him. Perpetual Epiphany as people try to discern in him the way of grace, a life of peace, truth of Divine Purpose for all of us humans. Mark doesn't tell stories of Jesus birth. For him, this sacred discernment begins with John and Jesus' baptism. It's the start of a long journey—all the places Jesus walks, people he meets, the questions and inspiration he shares. As Jesus begins to see, to understand, to accept who God calls him to be, hear again what the Spirit may say. {Read Mark 1:4-11 }

I was in college pondering questions from texts like these ... Jesus' humanity and divinity? the Trinity? Angels, miracles, heaven and hell? You know, minor matters. I journeyed to the home of my wise magi, Lew Briner. He'd offer treasures of a joyful welcome, a warm hug when I left, tea, and listening sympathetically. I recall little of what he said by way of answer. I still cherish his constant affirmation, with a smile and twinkling eyes: "Good question!"

They're more than just ideas of theology, of course. Our image of God—judgmental? gracious?—reflects how we relate with other people. These questions about divinity were really about my humanity. You see, friends, I've come to believe that faith weaves three central questions. Who am I? A question of identity we explore through story. Who is God? How does Grace / Holy Love give me life? A question of theology seeking meaning. And who are neighbors I'm called to

serve? A question of ethical purpose in community. How in hell or heaven on earth do the first two, me and God, relate? Good questions!

The gospels are filled with such questions. John the Baptizer prepares the way of the Lord, as the voice of one crying out in the wilderness ... And crowds of commoners, even soldiers and tax collectors cry out: “What then shall we do?” Jesus so often teaches in Socratic style—telling parables, implying: which one are you? He even asks his closest friends and followers, more explicitly: “Who do people say that I am? Who do you say that I am?” Once a most learned leader of faith asked Jesus: “Which commandment is greatest, first of all?” If it was intended as hostile inquisition, Jesus quickly turns it and draws from somewhere deep inside a sense of longing inquiry. We know how Jesus’ response reveals even one basic question isn’t such a simple consideration. Yes, love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength ... and relate that love, express it most fully in love for neighbors. The leader echoes him. Jesus affirms: good questions. And then he encourages: You aren’t far from fullness of life in the reign of God.

Rainer Maria Rilke left Paris to recuperate from illness—maybe like isolating amid Covid of his time. He scooped up papers, and later, found among them a letter from a young poet. Out of his own longing for fullness Rilke responded, “I’m touched by your beautiful anxiety about life ... [and] ... I feel that there is *no one* anywhere who can answer for *you* those questions and feelings which, in their depths, have a life of their own ...”

Can we imagine what he means? In and beyond greatest emotional depths our hearts can plumb, or speculative heights our minds can ascend, or mystical intuition our guts can sense? Questions that swirl inside and seem to take on a life of their own, as we like magi long to know Christ.

“Have patience with everything unresolved in your heart,” Rilke urges, “and try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language.” Don't press for answers we are not yet ready to hear or able to receive, he warns. The point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into an answer ... fullness of life out of your innermost self.

Friends, as we seek to be wise, to know Christ, discernment is loving and living into questions. Maybe life for you is good, settled, joyful. Maybe it's a bit more like being in an Exodus wilderness. For all of us in society, much is unresolved, Covid-disrupted, dissonant in many ways ... which unavoidably shapes us, unsettles us as we try to love others. We need space for discernment. Now, what does that really mean?

Discernment comes from a Sanskrit word that means “to pour out.” So, we pour out our hearts in prayer and reflection, spoken conversation or silent longing, structured assessment or the many ways our souls work, even with tears of joy or frustration. Discernment is not so much a *goal to pursue*, as a *call* we become open to *perceive*. More like catching the wind of the Spirit in our sailing canvas, than straining at oars in a rowboat through storms. Discernment is not as much *achieving decisions* for their own sake, as *receiving wisdom* amid relationships and responsibilities giving direction. Discernment is not as much *declaring boldly* what we want from life, as *listening humbly* for what life tells us about who we truly are. All of us enter into discernment in ways that work for our personality—maybe a more structured analytical exercise, journaling, extended silence, walking, following a whim.

At heart, whatever we face, whatever we do, friends, I pray we may remember our baptism, like Jesus. Repeatedly in his gospel, Mark reminds us of this scene for Jesus. On the mount of Transfiguration in the middle of his ministry, and at his

crucifixion when the temple curtain tears like the heavens here and Divine words get spoken by a soldier. “You are my beloved child. With you I am well pleased.” In discernment we center in Holy Love, frame questions life seems to be posing, and listen for God’s voice. We attend deeply to see true goodness through all that’s false, phony, misleading; to sense what God is doing among us. In several conversations this week, about transitions we face, we came round to seeing / discerning life as a process of receiving grace and responding with gratitude. Maybe such discernment starts with retelling our story, identifying our gifts and struggles, reviewing assumptions, core values. And then we sort of dance between shedding / releasing and exploring, weighing options, testing new possibilities.¹ In these liminal moments, it’s really best not to rush to decision. As we discern true life in its beauty and breadth, its difficulties and depth, then guidance will flow from the grace of self-awareness, acceptance and peace, trusting Divine Presence and Purpose in which we have some small part.

The Holy One who came to Jesus at the Jordan, keeps coming to us across the ages, amidst our most intimate questions saying: “Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth. Do you not perceive it?” (Isaiah 43:19) What Peter knew for sure, from years of experience, was that more fishing was futile. Jesus invited him to envision a boat full of fish and a ministry of catching people. And so he cast his net. The lame beggar was hoping for a hand-out to get him through another day. Peter and John gave him new legs for living every day. The disciples were looking for a Messiah who would deliver them from Rome. God came in Christ to enlist them in the work of saving the world.

Today is often when we’d share ordination and installation of our new class of elders and deacons. Church leaders called and elected to discern and lead our witness as the body of Christ. We’ll wait for the real laying on of hands to feel that connection when we’re together again. In a moment we’ll close with prayer from

Howard Thurman to bless our service together. Friends, may we all live into this New Year and many years ahead as God called those among us here to serve. To center, to listen, to see, to trust how the Spirit moves through our concerns, our longings, our questions and perspectives transforming them into sacred possibilities. Discernment work takes patience and perseverance. Sometimes we get flashes of insight or passion, mystical moments of clarity. More often, it's a discipline of attending to how we live in ordinary ways every day.

As we pursue a true sense of self and purpose inevitably we ask: to whom do we belong? to other people in community? to Grace and Love that is divinity? Do we believe this is a world with moral order and meaning at the center? We must ultimately answer with how we live—yes or no. We won't always be certain. We'll always be ambivalent. Our great labor of life, Thurman urges, is to make commitments, and then affirm and transform them in practice.ⁱⁱ Friends, that's what makes any wise insight really matter. That's where all our longings, conversations, desires, ongoing exploration lead on the journey of life. Question. Attention. Devotion. Dedication. Resurrection.

With Howard Thurman, amended a bit to grace our church's newly serving officers among all of us, let us pray. God, we gather in all of our available parts to see if somehow the meaning of our own lives and the meaning of the journey to which we are committed may be made clear. We want to be better than we are. So often we do not know how. Again and again, we feel moved by the impulse to be better but we do not quite know how to give way to it, that it might sweep through us with its renewal and its inspiration. Oh, that our total being and lives might be a tuned instrument in your hands, making the kind of music that will calm the distressed, heal the broken body and mind, and bring tenderness to those who feel rejected and outcast. So may it be for leaders of this congregation, and for all of us as we serve trying to sing of Holy Love made manifest in a child, our Savior, so blest. As we

wait in your presence, God, gather us in, that we might be a lung through which your Spirit may breathe. We wait, O God, we wait.ⁱⁱⁱ

Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ See Susan Beaumont, *How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going* (Lanham, MD: Rowan and Littlefield, 2019), 68-90.

ⁱⁱ Howard Thurman, *Essential Writings* selected by Luther E. Smith Jr. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 137-142. See also, David Brooks, *the Second Mountain*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Quoted and abridged from Howard Thurman, *Essential Writings* selected by Luther E. Smith Jr. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 145-146.