

Matthew 2: 1-12**Finding Hope for your Life****Sunday December 21, 2014****© Rev. Dr. Susan E. Cartmell****The Congregational Church of Needham**

During the month of December our worship theme is hope. Hope is a basic human emotion. We cherish people who live with hope and we are drawn to them. It is one of the things about children that delights us. People with hope inspire the rest of us. The Bible is a precious book of stories about men and women long ago who faced into life's uncertainties but found a way to live with hope. Hope does not have anything to do with your station in life or what you can afford. Some of the poorest people in the Bible showed the greatest hope in the face of bad luck, harsh setbacks or even systematic oppression. Nowhere is hope more palpable than in the story of the birth of Jesus, God's son sent to us all in the most vulnerable of packages- an infant born out of doors in Bethlehem of Judea. He came to a poor Jewish couple living under Roman Rule. The whole story of how God planned this is completely illogical unless you put your faith in hope.

Some of the most hopeful people of all were the Wise Men. Far to the East lived three of the most hopeful people that ever walked this earth. Astrologers who studied the heavens for clues about life, they discovered a star in the Middle East that seemed to ignite their hope that something new was about to happen. They took the risk of embarking on a dangerous journey to see what the sign meant. Let's take a look at their story and see what they can tell us about hope for our lives today.

In the first place the Wise Men tell us that when you live with hope, life is an adventure.

Melchior, a Persian king, Caspar, an Indian prince and Balthazar, an Arabian king were enormously curious. They came to the stable with their keen resolve, their determination to mount a caravan. They came with their outrageous gifts fit for a king. The odd juxtaposition of their lavish gifts and resolute faith bowing before a baby asleep in a stall, lying in a manger for a bed brings a different level of adventure to this tale. They are so far out of their element. They have risked so many new surprises, away from home, strangers to the Jewish culture, and casting their lives into the whims of fate and the hands of God. When you live with that kind of hope you cannot help but have some adventures.

Hope is the ability to live at the edge of what you know. Paul writes, For in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for who hopes for what he already sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, and imagine something new we wait for it eagerly and with perseverance. When you live with hope you pursue your dreams.

Last month the First Lady Michelle Obama recognized a children's music program from Boston with a National Arts and Humanities Youth Program Award. Project Step was started by a father who came from Haiti fifteen years ago with a lot of hope and not much else. He was determined his children would learn classical music. It was hard because so few children of color study classical music and he knew they needed a program. He joined with other parents to start Project Step which offers families of color in Boston classical instruments and lessons. One of the parents interviewed by the *Boston Globe* was Yvonne Brooks a single mother of a son and two daughters; they have all learned to play a stringed instrument and Brooks is determined that they continue to pursue music. She moved to Newton for the schools and rented an apartment she often heats at 57 degrees as a way to be able to afford everything. Her eldest is a boy who graduated from the program and now studies

Applied Mathematics at Yale. He sometimes plays with his sisters in a string ensemble. Project Step has changed these children and their families. Hope is a way of living with a sense of adventure.

Secondly, the Wise Men remind us that often the most hopeful thing you can do is to put one foot in front of another. When you consider their journey across all that sand and more miles than we can count, you wonder how they sustained their hope, through weeks and months of travel. Sometimes the most hopeful thing you can do is stay the course one step at a time. How does anyone live with hope over time?

Philosopher Wendell Berry has written an essay about hope over a lifetime. He describes a couple Dan and Pam, ranchers from Wyoming. This is the second marriage for each of them. Dan married his high school sweetheart and lost her to a virulent cancer when their children were young. Pam's life has been sculpted by worry for her brother who is severely handicapped. They both carry the weight of life's experience, but they carry on nonetheless. "The years came and went, as did the cattle. Dan's days were spent caring for his cows, year after year, season after season." Dan became a state representative from Wyoming and Pam advocates for the handicapped, but one day when they were both out of town they returned home to find their home burned to the ground, the fire consuming the mementos of their earlier loves and lives, a tragedy they could barely take in. But they have built a new house with new memories and continued to teach their grown children that homes are built on the solid foundation of a hope perseveres. {Story from "Learning to Live Proximately" by Wendell Barry in *Visions of Vocation: Common Grace for the Common Good*, Steven Garber ed. Downers Grove, IL: intervarsity Press, 2014}.

Hope does not just happen. Life happens. You have to choose hope and keep choosing it every day until the habit of hope sinks into your bones. Being hopeful won't protect you from danger.

There is something innocent and naïve almost about these Three Wise Men. They come from royalty and they trust what they know best. They enter Herod's court and believe he will be their guide to this foreign land. They bond with people from their own class, but they don't fully see the danger Herod poses or realize he is manipulating them. Living with hope won't shield you from danger. It won't protect you from tyrants who would try to manipulate. But it will change the way you see things. They came into the region seeking advice from Herod, but they also knew enough to trust their dream and go home another way.

Finally find a star and follow it. The Wise Men were astronomers and they had cultivated the habit of looking up. If you want to live with hope you need to look up too. When you leave the house every morning make your first glance a look to the sky and you will feel a surge of hope. You can always look down and concentrate on what needs to be done. Or you can reach for your cell phone and check for messages. Or you can throw your head back and take in the sky. Even on a bad day that's your best option because it will change the way you face the day.

Another astronomer, a cosmologist really, is one of the most hopeful and inspiring men alive today. His name is Stephen Hawking. I confess I did not know much about him and his story scared me a little but the new movie about his life – the theory of Everything – served to introduce me to this wonderful man who is fun and funny, a brighter star in the intellectual star you will never see, but also a man of great compassion and human understanding.

Well known as one of the world's greatest minds ever, the movie depicts him as one of greatest souls, too. Though he professes to be an agnostic, he remains one of the most hopeful men of our time. Though he is confined to a wheelchair which has been his home for five decades, he has written

scientific breakthroughs in books like *The History of Time*. He has changed modern theories of space and time though he cannot speak a word himself without an electronic box.

Based on a book written by his wife Jane, the mother of their three children the movie tells of how they met at Cambridge as seniors, how they married just after Stephen was diagnosed with ALS, a motor neuron disease, how Jane always believed in him, how they loved each other, raised three children with humor and wisdom, how their love was bountiful and their children thrived. There are even some scenes where Hawking entertained the children before dinner, with all the gust of a child himself, careening around the living room in his wheelchair while a son and daughter perched on it laughing. The movie illustrates the man's resolve, and his indomitable hope that defies human explanation. When he lost the ability to speak they found a speech box so that he could click letters and find words on a screen with his eyes. Several years ago he gave a TED talk. It was only after the talk when he took questions that the audience gained a true appreciation for what effort it takes to communicate. Answering the first question took him seven minutes, not because he did not know what to say but because that is how long it took to put the sentences together for the voice box to articulate.

His professor at Cambridge said this man has defied every expectation scientifically and personally. His doctors gave him two years to live when he was diagnosed with ALS in his mid-twenties. Professor Hawking is now 72 years old. For fifty years he has baffled doctors. Hawking says "Hope is everything. There is no limit to human endeavor. While there is life, there is hope. "