



**North Shore
Congregational
Church**

FOX POINT, WI

From the Pulpit...

“A Gift Worth Searching For”

Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching

Multiple Readings Throughout the Service

Matthew 2: 1-12; Isaiah 43: 1-3a, 16-21

As a kid, I have to say that New Year's Day was, without a doubt, one of my least favorite days of the entire year. New Year's Eve offered so much potential. There were often treats that were part of the evening. Perhaps you were with family friends (or your own friends as you got a bit older), and you got to stay up extra late to watch that ball drop and count down to midnight in celebration. All that excitement. All that energy. All that anticipation. Then, the next morning you'd wake up... and... nothing! My parents would spend hours sitting on the couch watching the Rose Bowl parade, which to my teen mind was nothing but a bunch of trailers with flowers pasted all over them, I couldn't go play with my friends because we were all stuck spending the day with our families even though our families weren't actually doing anything and, frequently, New Year's marked the end of Christmas break and the return to school that was to follow. More years than not, New Year's Day, for me, was an experience of an extraordinary let-down after the night of anticipation I'd experienced before.

It's one example, though, of a common element of the human condition. Our life experience is filled with anticipation and excitement that it isn't always met by the reality that followed. They say you should never meet your idols, as they never live up to the hype. I remember, so clearly, an experience that our daughter, Megan, had when she was participating in competitive cheerleading. There was a national figure – a choreographer who was prominent on social media and tv – of whom she was a huge fan. Her gym hired that individual to come spend a week with them and choreograph their show. She was ecstatic. She couldn't wait. Three days in – she was miserable. Turns out the guy was egotistical, rude, and borderline abusive to the athletes. She was devastated.

It is a commonplace part of the experience of life.

- How many movies have we waited for with bated breath, only to walk out knowing we just lost 2 hours of our life we could never get back?
- How many restaurants were we excited to try, only to be able to barely stomach what we were served and/or deal with the poor service we were given?
- How many travels have not gone anything like we anticipated?
- How many times have we entered into the new year with great expectation for what was to come, only to reach the next December 31 and we rejoice that the year is over.

I could go on and on with these, but my point is that I think we begin to get jaded by this recurring cycle. We begin to temper our expectations so that we won't be disappointed. We sometimes go as far as to not strive for things, or to not give it our all, because we don't want to experience the letdown of things not working out. We talk ourselves out of hoping for things so that we don't have to feel the disappointment of things not falling our way. In our professions, in our relationships, in our life's aspirations, there are times – perhaps not all the time, but there are times – when we relegate our expectations to the unexceptional because we simply don't want to experience the letdown of another exciting and expectant New Year's Eve being followed by the mediocrity of hours sitting in front of a television staring at a bunch of flowers pasted on the side of a trailer.

Now, take the lens of that human experience and consider, if you will, the story of these visitors from the east who travel to visit Jesus. Every year, at Epiphany, we are reminded that we don't know nearly as much about these travelers as we think we do. I'm not going to get into all of that today except to simply remind us that we don't know who they were, how many they were, where they came from, or exactly when they got there. What's important for our reflections today, however, is that we read in Matthew they were going to seek the one who was born 'king of the Jews.' That was their expectation in this journey. On Christmas Eve, I based my reflections on the fact that we know now what they didn't know then. The reality, however, is that they didn't know, then, what we know now. They weren't searching for a Savior – they were searching for a king.

Those visitors from the east were looking for the one the prophets had talked about. For centuries the people of Israel had clung to promises like those of Isaiah 43 in which they were reminded of God's promised presence and future that would ultimately be made known in the Messiah. The Messiah, however, wasn't seen to be a savior – and he most certainly was not seen to be God incarnate – the Messiah, as they expected, was seen to be a king. The Messiah was the ultimate David – the one who would restore the people of Israel to their greatness and glory in this world. That's what those visitors were looking for. Those magi were looking for the child born to be the ultimate, worldly, king of the Jews. They were looking for the one that would lead the Israelites to God's promised future for the Israelites in this world.

In the case of those Magi, it's worth noting that what they searched for was but a small part of the wonder they actually found.

- They looked for one who would guide Israel to the Promised Land – they found one who would unveil God's greater promises to all generations for both then and ages to come.
- They looked for the one who would rule the Jews – they found the one who would become the King of all Kings.
- They looked for the earthly Messiah of whom Isaiah and the prophets spoke – they found a Savior for which the world cried out without ever knowing it.

My point? My point is that those visitors traveled far, with great anticipation, to find the one born to be King of the Jews, but what they found exceeded those expectations in ways they never could have expected and likely didn't fully comprehend. My point is that, in a world in which the reality so often fails to live up to the hype, those visitors from the east experienced one of

life's rare moments, and in fact the ultimate moment, in which the hype didn't even begin to reflect the reality that followed.

The truth is that life is filled with moments and experiences that don't live up to the hype, some that meet the expectation, but only precious few in which the excitement and anticipation that we bring is actually exceeded by the reality that follows. And, for many understandable reasons, we are often jaded by that reality to the extent that we temper our expectations, stifle our strivings, and sometimes simply acquiesce to circumstances of mediocrity so as to avoid the risk the anticipation of another exciting New Year's Eve being followed by hours of staring at a bunch of flowers pasted on the side of a trailer.

As we enter into this New Year, some do it with great anticipation, others with apathy, and still others with trepidation for what the year may bring. In most cases, the highs won't be quite as high as we hope and the lows not quite as low as we fear. I am convinced, however, that the greatest gifts and blessings that lie before us rest in the hands of God, and if we truly want to discover those gifts and blessings in our lives, today, we have to follow the lead of the magi and look, with great anticipation, for what God will unveil in our lives – trusting, as Paul writes to the church in Rome, that “no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him.: (2 Cor. 2:9)