

**First Parish UU, Bridgewater**  
**Worship Service – Soul Matters Theme: “Possibility”**  
**Sunday, January 6, 2019 10:30am**

**Thought for Contemplation:** “Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him.”

- Matthew 2:1-2

**Sermon** “Against All Odds”

Rev. Paul Sprecher

The story of the three kings who “of Orient are” is, of course, quite improbable. Let me first grant that to those of you who are skeptics out there. There are dreams that give instructions to the wise men, there is the enormous distance that would presumably have been traveled, and of course that wandering star. I suggest this may be one of those stories that is true even though it never happened.

The story is recorded only in the Gospel of Matthew and actually contradicts the story we read at our candlelight service from the Gospel of Luke, which tells not of wise men but of shepherds. That story must have taken place at least in year 6 A.D., based on the fact that Quirinius, whom the story says was ruling Syria, started his job that year. The story of the wise men can’t take place later than 4 B.C., when Herod died. Nevertheless, the story as customarily told as though both shepherds and wise men appeared together in the manger, drawn from very near and from very far to worship the newborn – hence the manger scenes with which we’re all familiar. On the other hand, traditional celebration of the arrival of the wise men occurs 12 days after the manger scene with the

shepherds – that is, today, the Feast of Epiphany. Some traditions elaborating on the visit suggest that in fact it was 2 years and 12 days in light of the 2,000-mile journey they would have had to undertake.

The wise men were pursuing a possibility, not a certainty. Perhaps their journey was inspired by something said by their own prophet Zoroaster. In any case, consider the odds against their actually finding an infant 2,000 miles away in an obscure town in a country far away and unfamiliar to them. They followed a dream, a star, not a certainty, with the chance of finding a needle in a haystack. Still, as the story goes, they undertook the journey against all odds and found what they were seeking, the birth or infancy of someone who would literally change the world. As I said in my homily at our Candlelight service:

These stories are about a great reversal that can be dreamed of and that each of us can help to bring about. Not everything has changed, true, but a new possibility has come into being, an assertion that naked displays of power and exploitation are not OK, not just the way of the world, but can be challenged and restrained and changed. It's not that all evil has been banished or that peace has prevailed at every turn, but rather that a better way is possible, change is possible – possible because human beings are in fact empowered to bring about those changes. This is the essence of the teachings that Jesus left us, and it is all embodied in these stories of his birth – stories in which the humblest to the most exalted gather to honor this baby who brings new life and new possibilities. Kings tremble because their rule may be overthrown

by ordinary folks; the rich can no longer imagine that they are without responsibility to the poor; the violent can no longer insulate themselves from the consequences of their evil deeds.

And why not a star? As our responsive reading says, “Who knows what uncommon life may yet again unfold, if we but give it a chance?”

“So many things are possible when you don’t know they’re impossible,” as Norton Juster puts it in *The Phantom Tollbooth*.

Another such possible but improbably story that I’ve been reading and reflecting on is the remarkable life of Frederick Douglass as told in David W. Blight's recent biography *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom*. Douglass was born on a plantation in Talbot County Maryland sometime in February 1818, though he could never be certain of his age because no record of his birth was kept. He was most likely conceived when his mother was raped by her master or one of his relatives. He was separated from his mother very early in his life and raised by his grandmother and then separated from her when he was six. He had the good fortune to be sent to Baltimore to serve in the household of the master’s brother where he was briefly taught the alphabet by his mistress – the beginnings of an education that were quickly halted when his master discovered it and convinced his wife that literacy was incompatible with slavery – as indeed it is. As Douglass later often said, "knowledge is the pathway from slavery to freedom."<sup>1</sup> He learned to read from white children with whom he was able to play on the streets of Baltimore. He was soon returned to field labor, but he had

learned enough to be able to teach other slaves to read the New Testament, gathering as many as 40 slaves to study with him. After six months they were found out and dispersed by local ruffians wielding sticks and stones.

Douglass himself was then sent “to work for Edward Covey, a poor farmer who had a reputation as a "slave-breaker". He whipped Douglass regularly, and nearly broke him psychologically. The sixteen-year-old Douglass finally rebelled against the beatings, however, and fought back. After Douglass won a physical confrontation, Covey never tried to beat him again.[25]”<sup>2</sup>

Having surmounted the harsh attempts to break his spirit, he was returned to Baltimore and was able to escape to the north in 1838, settling first in New Bedford where he worked in the shipyards, and moving later to Lynn.

From these deeply oppressive origins, Douglass rose to become a foremost advocate of abolition, the best-know orator of the day, and the most photographed man of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. He was consulted by Lincoln himself about the future of the emancipated slaves.

We have a local connection as well. He spoke in Brockton in what is now the Douglass Community Garden on Frederick Douglass Avenue just behind Messiah Baptist, and some of us participated in a reading there of his speech “What is the Fourth of July to the Slave” there a few years ago.<sup>3</sup>

Such a career was improbable at the time but became possible because of Douglass’ belief in the possibility of freedom and his determination to achieve it.

And why not a star? “So many things are possible when you don’t know they’re impossible.”

The past election was marred by egregious lies about the members of a caravan of refugees fleeing Central America in fear for their lives. Their stories are heartbreaking. *Mother Jones* recorded a few of them:

“[Kenia] Arias had to leave her six-month-old baby at home after she says gangs killed members of her family. “It’s very hard to leave the family, and yes, it really hurts, and one does the impossible to seek the American dream, to seek a better future, a better life, because in our country, you cannot even live,” she said. “They want to kill you for nothing. Even then it is difficult to leave the country where you were raised, where you have spent all your life. It is very hard, but we have to go forward.”

Jordin Yalir, “a trans woman from San Pedro Sula, joined the caravan. She was assaulted by a group of males on her way to university. She left home at 11; her parents would not accept her. “I said, ‘Enough, I cannot continue here.’”

Elder Manuel Martinez says, “The road has been difficult.

“In Honduras I cut hair and helped my father make doors,” said Manuel. “They charge you just for living—the tax of war, as they say.” The day he left, he had to pay his monthly bills for his barbershop, but that did not leave him with enough to pay the gangs their fee. “I better go,’ I said.

“I’m afraid of the gangsters. They say that if you leave the neighborhood and then later return, they will kill you. It’s like me—if I go back, they will kill me. None of us [in the caravan] can go back for the same reason,” he added.”<sup>4</sup>

Migrants fleeing their countries to seek asylum in the United States are entitled to a hearing to demonstrate their fear of imminent danger or persecution. They are entitled to a hearing under our laws and under international agreements to which we are a party. I recently told the story of how more than 900 Jewish refugees on the ship *St. Louis* were turned away from our shores in 1940 and returned to the near certainty of incarceration in the death camps. The memory of such stories is one of the reason that we as a nation offer compassion and asylum to others who are fleeing from persecution. The fact that there is a two-year backlog in hearings for petitioners for asylum is one of the reasons for the supposed crisis on our southern border. We can do better. We can provide a fair and timely hearing for those who are fleeing from the threat of death and persecution.

They are fleeing toward the possibility of safety and a life free of such dangers as they face in their homes. We as a nation can keep such hopes alive.

And why not a star? “So many things are possible when you don’t know they’re impossible.”

The story of the wise men is a story of people who took risks and seized on a possibility to celebrate a birth that has literally changed the world and laid the

groundwork for what we in our first principle affirm and promote as “the inherent worth and dignity of every person.” In that spirit we in our congregation welcome the stranger, provide refuge from the cold, feed those who are hungry, visit those in prison, help to provide clothes and sustenance for impoverished children and their mothers, and help to provide comfort and recovery to bereaved children by our offerings this morning and for the rest of this month.

Frederick Douglass improbably escaped from beatings and attempts to break his spirit to become a prophet of freedom who sought and helped to achieve emancipation for all slaves.

At our southern border we have petitioners with a right to a hearing and a right to safety from death and persecution – keeping this possibility alive is one of the defining challenges of our times.

Those who grasp possibilities, who notice stars, are exemplars for all of us. Pablo Neruda puts it this way in his poem “Die Slowly, or Life lies in pursuing the possible:

He who becomes the slave of habit,  
who follows the same routes every day,  
who never changes pace,  
who does not risk and change the color of his clothes,  
who does not speak and does not experience,  
dies slowly...

He or she who does not turn things topsy-turvy,  
who is unhappy at work,  
who does not risk certainty for uncertainty,  
to thus follow a dream,  
those who do not forego sound advice at least once in their lives,  
die slowly...  
Let's try and avoid death in small doses,  
reminding oneself that being alive requires an effort far greater than the  
simple fact of breathing...”<sup>5</sup>

Blessed Be, and **Amen**

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frederick\\_Douglass](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frederick_Douglass)

<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frederick\\_Douglass](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frederick_Douglass)

<sup>3</sup> Another such reading is reported here: <https://www.enterpriseneews.com/news/20170625/in-brockton-frederick-douglass-speaks-universal-language>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.motherjones.com/media/2018/12/migrant-caravan-mexico-portraits-photos-brett-gundlock/>

<sup>5</sup> Full poem here: <http://eleternoretorno.blogspot.com/2005/06/pablo-neruda-die-slowly.html>  
Video Meditation:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G6V7t5VByuY&list=PL804FB1BDEFCDDBA2&index=14>

Spoken: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aBYcDqZknzE>