

January 6, Epiphany (Matthew 2:1-12)

In welcoming the Magi into her home, Mary opens the door to the whole world.

by [JoAnn A. Post](#) in the [January 2024](#) issue

It was a small house. In a small town.
It was miles away from the manger.
It was a good life. In a safe home.
Light-years from the danger.

A musician friend and I have collaborated on a few original hymns in the past, and now we are writing a ten-song Christmas cantata, telling the story of Jesus' birth.

Our song "Open the Door" tells of Mary's welcome of the wise strangers at her door. As we imagine it, she greets her guests as though she has been expecting them, flinging the door open to them and, ultimately, to the whole world.

I can imagine that small house in a small town. I grew up in such a place, on a windswept northern Iowa farm. We were the descendants of German immigrants, tall and broad shouldered, fair skinned and plainspoken, our roots sunk deep in that fertile soil.

In 1975, Iowa was the first state to settle refugees from Southeast Asia, at the close of the Vietnam War. My small town was among the communities that welcomed them, gathering warm clothing and sturdy furniture for the small rental house in which they would live. Though I was too young to be privy to the decision-making, I can imagine my elders in the church and community opening their hearts to these strangers in need. Did my immigrant ancestors remember that they had also once been strangers from a distant land?

The family we resettled—three adults and five children—arrived midway through the school year. They didn't speak English. They didn't eat Jell-O. They had never seen winter or ridden a school bus. I cannot imagine how foreign we were to them, how lonely they must have been, how frightened of us and our ways. We must have seemed to be pale giants. And as welcoming as we imagined we were, our welcome was not enough to keep them. Within the year they had moved to Minneapolis, nearer to others who spoke their language, who looked and ate and lived like them.

Some of the locals were deeply insulted by this perceived snub. After all, my small town had opened its arms and hearts to these strangers from a distant land. My small town had imagined the family would put down roots, as our ancestors had. But it was not to be. The family we welcomed stayed only for a time; we were but a stop on a much longer road to a new home for them.

Our song continues:

But then the kings came, asking for another.
And when the kings came, they stirred a loving
mother.
She had been waiting for this moment since
the day that he'd been born.
She had known that it would happen since the
star shone that morn.

The wise ones we meet in Matthew's Gospel would have passed through many small towns in pursuit of the star, as out of place in ancient Israel as Vietnamese immigrants were in Iowa. Mary does not hesitate to invite them into her home, to introduce them to her son, to receive their well-intentioned but wildly inappropriate gifts. Because, as we imagine it in song, she knew they would come. Maybe not these particular strangers, but she knew that the world would come to meet her son.

And she knew that she would welcome them in his name. That this child would be light to the nations. That in opening her door to the traveling strangers, she is opening her door to the world.

Mary also knows that they will not, cannot stay. Their departure is not an affront. It is a necessary part of the story. They will carry news of Christ the king to their own people, in their own language, in their own way. Expanding the love of God in Christ

to places of which Mary cannot even dream.

As I write, our new cantata has been sung only in rehearsal. But when I close my eyes, I can imagine opening night. It will be a cold, dark, probably snowless Chicago night. The sanctuary will be dim and warm. Our children's fluty voices will rise with whispering strings as together we sing of the impact of Jesus' birth on the world, on our lives. We will sing of Mary's smiling face as she opens her door to the world.

And not far from us, migrants from Venezuela, bused to our city from our country's southern border, will be settling for the night in converted hotel rooms, police station lobbies, and tent cities in public parks. They are tired and terrified and far from home. Strangers to us and we to them.

In welcoming the wise ones into her home, Mary opens the door to the whole world. We are invited to do the same: to welcome the stranger to our country, our congregations, and our homes. Sometimes they stay; sometimes they continue on. Always, if Mary has her way, they will be welcome at our door.