

*We three kings of Orient are; bearing gifts we traverse afar,
Field and fountain, moor and mountain, following yonder star.
O star of wonder, star of night, star with royal beauty bright.
Westward leading, still proceeding, guide us to thy perfect light.*

Follow The Star

Matthew 2:1-12

As I sat down to write this, the nation was beginning to ponder recent world events: we've just received news about the killing of an Iranian military commander, a strike ordered by the President of the United States.

The world is still holding its breath. Questions are buzzing all around: Are we at war? Who is at risk? What will happen? What comes next?

We live in a time of uncertainty. There is a low sense of trust in our nation's leadership. World leaders grow more insular. Our opinions are divided by greater and greater chasms. Social media feeds and encourages the deepening wedge.

It's fair to sum up the situation this way: we are anxious; we are afraid. As Ken said in last week's sermon, "These are difficult and divisive times."

How do we live in these times when we long for a sense of certainty? When our deepest desire is to know that what matters most to us --- our livelihoods, our security, our loved ones, our need to be loved --- that these are predictable, if not entirely controllable. We feel caught in a whirlwind of chaos. We feel directionless, wandering at the whims and follies of the powerful and the wealthy, whose own interests rarely intersect with our own.

We long for a word of hope.... because we are in need of a hopeful future.

As Christians who have just journeyed through the Christmas season, we are entering into the time known as Epiphany --- the revealing --- the light cast out on the darkness of the unknown. We too know what it is to seek a word about a hope-filled future. We seek what gives us comfort and strength, purpose and guidance for the time in which we're living.

The Scripture reading today is set in a gospel that seeks to communicate that very essence of purpose and promise and hope. It's an eschatological gospel, an apocalyptic gospel -- all of which means that there is a story to our lives. Stories that are contained in God's story. It is the revealing of what God has set in motion, has come to fulfillment in Christ, and continues to be revealed. Matthew invites us to be part of this story, seeing the world and living in the world as God's people under the lordship of Jesus Christ. [1]

Today's text draws us into that drama from the very first words, "In the time of King Herod..." The time of King Herod was a time of death and fear. Herod the Great was a cruel and evil ruler, a paranoid man, who would strike out at any who would threaten his power. His reign was marked by lies, deceit, and murder.

Jesus is born into Herod's time. Vulnerable. Powerless. Amid violence and insecurity. Jesus is a very different kind of king.

This is how it begins.

Our text continues with the entrance of the wise men from the east. They have followed a star. And have assumed that the star would lead them to the birth of a king at the usual place: where power already is. They arrive in Jerusalem, and go, not unreasonably, to King Herod. Where is the child? They ask him. Where is the child who has been born King of the Jews?

In asking those questions, they express their longing --- our longing --- for the one who would reveal all that God has promised. It is the antithesis of Herod's reign. They are searching for the promise that God does not abandon God's people to the sin that seems to rule the world. The promise that there will come a ruler who would *shepherd* the people of Israel.

They're words we sang out, too, in our first hymn, *Hail to God's Anointed*. "The one to break oppression, to set the captive free. To help the poor, bid the weak be strong. To turn darkness to light."

Herod, crafty man that he was, was quite aware of the challenge to his power. "He was frightened," the text says, "and all Jerusalem with him." And so he summons his religious CEOs and asks them to search the scriptures for an answer. Then, manipulative and scheming, he sends the wise men to Bethlehem, using them as pawns in a vicious and violent plan.

We read how the story continues: the wise men continue to follow the star until it leads them "to the place where the child was." Overwhelmed with joy, they recognize him, pay him homage, and present him with gifts for a king. And last, being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they leave for their own country by another road.

The intersection of these two kingdoms: that of Christ and that of Herod cannot be made too plain. That of Herod is corrupt, deceitful and murderous. That of Jesus is humble, world-changing, divine.

It has been said that "the conflict between the two kings dominates the whole of Matthew's gospel." And that "the conflict of the kings of the earth and the king of

heaven is a dominating theme of all our journeys to discipleship as we seek faithfully to follow Christ.”[2]

“The gospel,” as it has been described, “is an ongoing exercise to help us see the world through Christ. And that we can become a people freed by love, which is Jesus himself, (who) can live with the joy that comes from no longer being subject to the fear of death.” [3]

Such a choice on our journey. The choice of kings: one of death, one of life. One of fear, one of hope. As we follow the star, which king do we find? Which king do we choose? Which kind of power do we claim rules our lives?

If you haven’t seen it yet, and you are a fan of the *Star Wars* movies, my family and I went to see the final movie in the nine-movie series on Christmas Day. The whole premise of the *Star Wars* series is about allegiances: who has power? And whose side are you on? The evil Empire? Or the resistance?

The final movie has an incredible resolution of this choice in the character played by Adam Driver. Who will he be? Kylo Ren or Ben Solo? A man who behaves like a monster, caught up in a lust for power, domination, control? Or a man who chooses the good of others, a way of sacrifice, sharing...dare we even say love?

Matthew’s drama is in its early chapters in this morning’s text.

But we, as disciples, are presented with the same choice.

We are told that the wise men return home by another road.

Throughout the gospel, we are invited to find the Christ, acknowledge him Lord of our lives. We follow him into a new reality that has broken humbly yet gloriously into our lives, God’s promise, revealed in him.

And then we too, are to continue our journey by another road.

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The year 2020 is starting off in a perilous way.

There are Herods: leaders whose grasp for power will hurt or destroy anything that threatens it. There are those whose quest for certainty and security lead them down paths of destruction and violence. Hate crimes are on the rise. Mass shootings occur, and nothing changes other than teaching our children how to hide better in their classrooms. Economic inequality is growing. Our very climate is threatened and few are committed to acting in time to save our planet.

There is so much loss and pain, death and dying, illness and hurt.

But I know this: I know *this*. That we have been invited to be witnesses of God’s love, revealed to the world in the very counterpoint to evil...in a baby born long ago.

And wherever we choose love...wherever we speak and act against injustice, wherever we proclaim release to the captives and offer sight to the blind, when we

stand with those who hurt and comfort those who grieve, preach peace to the nations...wherever we choose love...then we proclaim God's presence and power and redeeming grace to God's world.

When we follow that star ...to the rightful King; when we choose, when we choose, when we choose to love.

Friends, I am realistic. There is no guarantee of our success. Despite the change in path of the wise men, Herod's wrath still slaughtered the innocents.

And as troops are sent into the Middle East, as wildfires consume Australia, as people die in record numbers in the city of Baltimore, and as the threats from hate speech and hate crimes rise -- and we're in the midst of a presidential impeachment and the effects that will have in guiding policies and decisions -- Oh yes, I am aware and I am concerned. And I confess my knees tremble at the state of the world. But what gives me comfort, in part, is the recognition that the wise men didn't travel alone.

Were there two of them? Three? Nine of them? More?
However many there were, they went *together*. And followed that star till their knees bent and their heads bowed before the Prince of Peace.

As we travel through these times, I am grateful we travel together. And I pray we will follow a star that leads to the King of Kings, Emmanuel, God with us.

We travel together, following a star, and this is why we can sing:
Raise a song of gladness. For this star leads, not to the ruthless might of Rome, of Herod, of darkness and despair... but to God.

As we go forward together, beloved community, into the year ahead...we are looking for God being born into our lives anew.

Together, let us be fed at God's table. May the bread and the cup give us strength for the journey and courage to face what's to come. May this meal unite our hearts and our lives into the great fellowship of God's children. May we be fed -- together --- with the gifts of hope, and peace, and despite it all, joy.

*Glorious now behold him arise, King and God and Sacrifice.
Alleluia! Alleluia! sounds through the earth and skies.
O star of wonder, star of night, star with royal beauty bright.
Westward leading, still proceeding, guide us to thy perfect light.*

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[1] Stanley Hauerwas, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible: Matthew

[2] Calum I. MacLeod, sermon January 8, 2006, quoting Eugene Boring

[3] Stanley Hauerwas, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible: Matthew