

**Oak Grove Presbyterian Church**

**Rev. Dr. Bart Roush**

**January 2, 2022**

**Matthew 2:1–12**

Let us pray for an awareness of and inspiration from the Holy Spirit.

O God, the Three in One, you draw us into your community of love with people across the ages and around the world. By the same Spirit that binds us together speak to us that what we read and ponder may enliven us and stretch us to trust and follow you, through Christ our Savior.

Amen.

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising and have come to pay him homage.” When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for from you shall come a ruler  
who is to shepherd my people Israel.’”

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them,

went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Having lived in Texas for many years, I learned a new appreciation for many things including the wisemen, or three kings. In much of Latin America, and southern Mexico in particular, the Christmas season is concentrated on January 6<sup>th</sup>, Epiphany or Three Kings Day. El Dia de Los Reyes, marking the end of Christmastide, or the 12 days of Christmas. As many of you know, we are still in Christmas, it is not yet over. The 12 days of Christmas start on Christmas day and go through the celebration of Epiphany.

At the church I previously served, the Sunday closest to Epiphany was a favorite day. It was actually this day when the Christmas pageant was held, a menagerie of children and adults who would tell the coming of the three magi or three kings to pay homage to the Christ child. It was a wonderful way to end the Christmas season and move into the new year and into the season of Epiphany where we celebrate the light of Christ coming into the world.

Like many things, the pandemic shifted the ability to hold an in-person pageant, or at the very least, we had to look at this tradition with new eyes. Figure out new ways of doing things. We have done this a lot; being required to look at things in a new way.

With fresh eyes to the Three Kings, I recognize this is not the easy Christmas story. There is the visit from the Three, but there is more, and it isn't easy. It's not really pageant material. I left out a couple of verses

that follow, which are pretty bad, but even without those verses, this story is a little darker than most of us recall or that typical Christmas pageants tell. But the rest of the story is there, and it just may be the story we need to hear.

In brief, there is a ruler that is easily threatened and turns to violence when he meets resistance. There are the three visitors, who first are conned by the fearful ruler, but then make a move toward resistance. There is a family on the run for their lives, seeking refuge in a foreign land. And then the part I didn't read, the slaughter of innocent children at the order of the king so that he can maintain power by any means necessary.

In our own times, we see or remember leaders who operate from a place of fear, and who are willing to do whatever is necessary to hang on to power. There are families on the run. Innocents who are being slaughtered either by violence or from a pandemic. And there are people who have been duped, whether by leaders or social media, who now maybe are getting an inkling that all was not as they were told, that the story they were sold was distorted, and they are leaning into resistance. So, while we might prefer the pageantry, it is hard to miss the relevance of this ancient story for our current time. It does feel somehow a little more realistic.

The three (or maybe more, did you notice it never says in scripture how many exactly) visitors were not kings, as the familiar hymn indicates, rather they were scholars of their day. They were astrologers. They were likely followers of Zoroastrianism, which is one of the oldest religions in the world which is still active in Iran today. It was the official religion of Persia before Islam.

Zoroastrians believe that the prophet Zoraster was miraculously conceived in the womb of a young Persian girl. Zoraster predicted that other divinely appointed prophets would be born. Zoroastrian priests believed that they could foretell these miraculous births by reading the stars. Like the Jews, Zoroastrian priests were anticipating the birth of the Savior. God is so very determined to be found, amongst even the wrong people. When they see the signs in the star they begin to search.

But on their way, when they inquire about where the child is, we are told all of Jerusalem is frightened, along with King Herod. They are called secretly to come to see King Herod. Herod wants to know more about this threat to his power, this king of the Jews. Herod lies to the wise men, declaring that he would like to pay homage as well to this new king. What is so threatening about a child? What is so threatening about God's mercy, grace, love, and salvation?

Herod asks the wise men to come back to him after they discover the location of the child.

Now, lest we get confused, it might be helpful to name which Herod we are talking about. This is Herod the Great when Jesus is born. He is different than Herod Antipas, who is king when Jesus is crucified. Herod Antipas is son of Herod the Great. But there is also Herod Archelaus, Herod Philip, and not one but two Herod Agrippas in scripture. It seems there is no shortage of Herods in the world. Really, Herod, and Herod, and Herod, and Herod, and the other two Herods are really the same person. Egotistical, insecure, ruthless, petty, power-hungry.

It seems there is never a shortage of Herods. Those that operate from insecurity and fear. Those who deflect responsibility and accountability, those that deceive to hold power, those that get rid or disregard the innocent in the interest of maintaining power.

Before we get too comfortable, and as some of us have named the Herods in our heads just now, let's give a brief pause. Lest we dismiss Herod as an evil villain, or only think it is the other person that can be a Herod, it is wise to remember that there are a lot of Herods, and that perhaps we might consider how much of a Herod we might be as well. Rather than be dismissive, it may be wise to take stock about how much we operate from fear, how much we call another an enemy, how much we make decisions based in our own self-interest or desire to remain important. There may be times when we act the part of Herod.

What is so threatening about God's salvation, mercy, grace, and love? It may be that it is a glaring reminder that we all need it. It may be a reminder bright as a star that shines a light that all of us, at times, can be terrified, and that we are not in charge, and that we need this love, mercy, grace, and salvation.

We, ultimately, do not have the final say in how the world works. How our lives will run their course. We are not in control. But this is not the last word. Herod is not the protagonist in this story, it isn't about him, as much as he (or we) would like it all to be about himself.

What is constant is the determination of God to show up. What is constant across the years, in spite of all the Herods, or our inclination toward our own Herod-ism, is that Jesus shows up. Even though Jesus' appearance can bring opposition, he still shows up and he invites people against the opposition to the grace, mercy, and love he brings. God shows up, God saves. And God, in the form of Christ comes for all, even those who we don't expect, even those outside of our own tribe.

Jesus leaves no one aside. Because Jesus doesn't just show up, he shows up on the side of those who are oppressed and those who are in need. And then Jesus works through others, through the unlikely; a young girl, a man who could have walked away, three visitors from a foreign land.

The world is difficult. We know this. Those entrusted with power can misuse and abuse that power and are not trustworthy. There are those that are well intentioned who fall prey to manipulation and misinformation. There are far too many children threatened by violence.

But we also know and can trust that Jesus shows up. And that God is still at work. At work for the sake of the vulnerable. At work for on behalf of those fleeing violence. And not just in mysterious or intangible ways, but also through us. God is fashioning us into Epiphany people to do God's work in the world. To take not a path toward Herod, but to take a new way. "To offer shelter and sanctuary. To advocate those who have had to flee their homes. Who resist oppression and violence and manipulation."

"God is at work in us fashioning us to be bearers of the light that has come into the world, the light that the darkness neither understands nor has overcome. God is at work fashioning, that is, an Epiphany people, people of the light, people who know that the joy and grace of Christmas is not a gift to be admired but one to be put to work for the sake of the world God loves so much."<sup>i</sup>

Just as we are not done with Christmas, Epiphany does not mark an end either. While the season is coming to an end, the work continues.

African American theologian, writer, educator, and civil rights leader Howard Thurman captures this in his poem, “The Work of Christmas.”

When the song of the angels is stilled,  
when the star in the sky is gone,  
when the kings and princes are home,  
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,  
the work of Christmas begins:  
to find the lost,  
to heal the broken,  
to feed the hungry,  
to release the prisoner,  
to rebuild the nations,  
to bring peace among the people,  
to make music in the heart.<sup>ii</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.davidlose.net/2019/01/epiphany-c-2018-the-other-christmas-story/>

<sup>ii</sup> Howard Thurman, “*The Work of Christmas*,” *The Mood of Christmas and Other Celebrations*