



Westminster Presbyterian Church
Knoxville, TN
January 7, 2024
The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble
“Epiphany Calling”

Matthew 2:1-12 (NRSV)

2:1 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem,

2:2 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."

2:3 When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him;

2:4 and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.

2:5 They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

2:6 '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.'"

2:7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared.

2:8 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."

2:9 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.

2:10 When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.

2:11 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.

2:12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

“Epiphany Calling”

Are you New Year’s resolution people?

I am. I’m also a huge New Year’s resolution breaker.

For example: A least one member of my household has been sick since Thanksgiving.

Children get sick from school; give it to their parents. Parents get sick from work; give it to their children.

Rinse and repeat.

Of course, you can’t make a New Year’s resolution not to get sick. But I did decide, after more than a few long and sometimes sleepless nights this past year,

-thinking over the move to Knoxville,

-thinking through my first months at Westminster,

-worrying about Advent and Christmas services,

I resolved, to stop thinking so much.

No, I resolved, to get more sleep, more exercise, to take better care of myself.

I went to sleep at 9:00 on New Year’s Eve.

Did the ball drop? No one in my house could tell you.

Who’s with me?

I woke up at 7am on New Year’s Day, after a wonderful night’s rest. And, I was unable to open my eyes. Try as I might, I just couldn’t open my eyes. Because 2023 had one last gift to share with me – our rather, my daughter had one more gift to share with me: Pink Eye!

Lindsey told me not to share that one with you. I couldn’t help myself. It was just too good a story. Don’t worry I got the drops. It’s all clear.

But my resolution for a healthy new year, was broken before it could even begin.

Are you New Year's resolution people?

The *New York Times* well-being newsletter posted their favorite New Year's resolutions last week¹:

- Dez Crawford of Portland, Oregon resolves to throw away every single empty pen she encounters this year. I love that resolution. I counted; I currently have 4 pens either empty or near empty in my desk. Why do I do that?
- Claudia Rosani in Milton Keynes, England resolves only to buy second hand clothes next year.
- Paul Murdoch of Jacksonville, Oregon says that last year, in his late 60s, he decided to say yes to every new thing offered to him – And this one just makes me anxious, but for him, it meant a new job overseas, new friends, even a fiancé, so it's working for him.

Are you New Year's resolution people?

For better or for worse, with resolutions, we tend to rely on our strength, our own will power – which, as we are human, means that most resolutions don't make it out of January.

In the season of Epiphany, when we celebrate the unfolding revelation of God's love in the coming of Jesus Christ, perhaps the better question is not so much what we resolve simply *to do*, but what are we allowing ourselves to be open to?

What are you opening yourself up to this year?

The second chapter of Matthew sets up a contrast. On the one hand is the action of God in the revelation of Jesus Christ. On the other is Herod, a symbol of power, and not just power, but despotism.

The Herod of this chapter is Herod the Great, the provincial King who ruled Jerusalem and its surrounding territories from 37 BC until his death in 4 AD.

¹ Jancee Dunn, "The New Year's Resolutions That Changed Your Lives." *The New York Times*. December 29, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/29/well/live/new-years-resolutions.html>

Herod is a Roman puppet – he derives his power not from the Jewish people he rules but from the Empire that conquered them. And he is known, in Scripture and in history as ruthless – imprisoning family members, executing anyone who got in his way.

When the Maji ask Herod, “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?” those are threatening words to Herod the Great. Herod the Great, not some baby born in a backwater like Bethlehem, bears the title, “King of the Jews,” an honor bestowed upon him by none other than the Roman Emperor, and if anyone deserves homage, it’s Herod, not Christ.

Herod responds to God’s new action in the world by trying to squash it. Immediately after our passage today is the massacre of the innocents in Bethlehem.

So, the contrast Matthew sets up is this: Christ, the light of the world, and Herod, power for power’s sake.

Life and death. God’s action in the world, and the violent powers opposed to that action.

It’s a binary. It’s a choice.

Matthew seems to ask us:

- How do you respond to that choice?
- How does the church respond to that choice?

Or better yet, if this is our choice, Matthew asks us:

- What do we do, to prepare ourselves, so when despotism appears, we aren’t fooled by it?
- And when God’s work in this world appears, we don’t walk past it?

Because that’s exactly what the chief priests and scribes of the story do. They are fooled by Herod and miss the star.

When King Herod heard [the Maji], 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."

The chief priests and the scribes are the religious establishment: the high steeple church;

 nestled in the halls of power;

 at Herod's beck and call in Jerusalem.

They know the traditions like the back of their hand; they can recite the prophesy without even looking it up. Yet, when the star appears overhead, they seem to have missed it. They don't know what the Maji are even talking about.

It was my first zoom interview with another Presbyterian church, far from Westminster, far from Knoxville, far from Tennessee. I was just starting to look around after many years at my last call. I don't remember much from the interview. By grace, when you get off the job market, I've found, some selective amnesia seems to kick in.

But one question stands out. We were talking about how I go about preparing sermons. And I had used what among Presbyterian pastors is a fairly cliché line, originating from the Swiss Theologian Karl Barth, that you "take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both. But interpret newspapers from your Bible."

I don't know if it was because I was, at that time, living in the bohemian Mecca that is Asheville, NC, or if it was more that my church had a reputation of being more outspoken than some on the day's issues, but this comment seemed to disturb one of my interviewers. One of the members of that church's PNC took up a line of questioning that boiled down to this:

How do you talk about the things in the newspaper without offending people?

Let me be honest, I fell all over myself in my answer. I don't know what I said, but it wasn't coherent – after that, we didn't have a second interview.

But I'll tell you what I was thinking. I was thinking, that you don't. You don't preach with the newspaper in one hand and the Bible in the other, worrying about offending people. Part of the work of the church is to push one another, or better, to let Scripture challenge us: our assumptions, our ways of being in this world. If we don't make space for the Spirit to challenge us, then what are we even doing here?

I read a book this week that mentioned the classic Michael Douglas movie “Wonder Boys.”² Douglas plays a once prize-winning novelist turned college professor, who is struggling to finish his second novel, even though he’s written some 2,000 pages already. He asks one of his best students to read his work and give her opinion, and when she does, she responds with these words, “You know how in class you are always telling us that writers make choices? You didn’t really make any choices.” Have you ever been to a church that didn’t really make any choices?

It's not a perfect analogy. What we are talking about here is not exactly a choice. It’s more of an openness to the movement of the Spirit, the Spirit that in certain times and places will direct the church to take a stand. So, when the ways of Herod appear, in the coming year, when the ways of Herod appear, in this country, in this state, in this town, we – as the body of Christ - must be open enough to the Spirit to be challenged, and compelled to say what the church needs to say:

- that violence and war are opposed to God’s peaceable kingdom,
- that the God of love condemns any form of dehumanization.
- that everyone is a child of God, and so, the church stands against every form of hate, prejudice, or discrimination, especially when that hate or discrimination is masquerading in Christian language.

The chief priests and scribes had that openness to the Spirit foreclosed, because they had become too identified with the halls of power around them. Their power hinged on Herod’s approval, so they read the Scriptures but failed to look up, failed to see the movement of God in our midst.

What does it take, to be open to the movement of God in our midst?

The Maji are star gazers. But notice, also, they need the Scriptures, in order to understand what they are seeing in the sky:

“Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising.”

Where have you seen his star at its rising?

² I found this illustration in Gil Rendle and Alice Mann, *Holy Conversations: Strategic Planning as a Spiritual Practice for Congregations* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), xix.

For me, it's simple moments.

- The first signs of Spring
- The view of the sunrise from my kitchen window
- The smile in my children's eyes

Professor of Preaching Tom Long, in his commentary on Matthew, writes, "*countless [experiences] draw our attention to the divine mystery that pervades and pushes through human events.*"³

But, he goes on to explain, these experiences, though precious, though enlightening, they need something else, for you to understand the work of God in their midst.

You need scripture, he says, because we read there about the character and promises of a God of love and liberation, who accompanied our ancestors of the faith, in their trials as a people.

But also, it's not just the book; is it?

It's the book and also the place – places that you can come back to, like this.

And it's not just places like this, it's communities like this.

This place, this people, this community, they show us that life is not just precious, but it is constantly touched by the hand and work of God, in our midst.

And even when we have trouble believing that, when we have trouble seeing God at work in our lives, these places, they surround us anyway, and show us that we are loved, that we are loved by God and God's people, and our lives therefore are meaningful, in all their beauty and brokenness.

So we come to these stories, these places, these communities, over and over again, so when the Herods of this world come forward, we aren't fooled. And when the star blazes overhead, we don't miss it, we don't miss the work and call of God in our lives.

Where have you seen his star at its rising?

Where have you seen his star at its rising?

³ My interpretation of the chief priests above is also drawing from Thomas G. Long's work *Matthew* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 15-19.