

## *LIVING IN THE LIGHT*

Matthew 2.1-21

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### **Matthew 2: *adapted from the New Revised Standard Version***

2 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, Magi from the East came to Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup> 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; <sup>4</sup> and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. <sup>5</sup> They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

<sup>6</sup> ‘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.’”

<sup>7</sup> Then Herod secretly called for the Magi and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup> 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.” <sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. <sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

### **The Escape to Egypt**

<sup>13</sup> Now after Magi had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for

the child, to destroy him.”<sup>14</sup> Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt,<sup>15</sup> and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, “Out of Egypt I have called my son.”

### **The Massacre of the Infants**

<sup>16</sup> When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise Magi, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the Magi.<sup>17</sup> Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

<sup>18</sup> “A voice was heard in Ramah,  
wailing and loud lamentation,  
Rachel weeping for her children;  
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.”

### **The Return from Egypt**

<sup>19</sup> When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said,<sup>20</sup> “Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child’s life are dead.”<sup>21</sup> Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel.

## **LIVING IN THE LIGHT**

Don’t let this beautiful music fool you.

Ariel Ramirez is telling a painful story. It’s the story at the end of Matthew 2 about Herod’s execution of innocent children in order to protect his power. And it’s also the more modern story of the composer’s homeland and the killing of thousands of social activists by its military government.

Ariel Ramirez is telling his story and his country’s story in the light of Matthew’s story.

Now if there is one thing that I will remember in particular about Pastor Ned's ministry with us, it is that we live our lives in the light of the stories we tell.

This was brought home to me on Monday at a memorial service for a young man who died on December 15; a 36 year-old who had a soft heart and a hard life. At that service, his son read a letter from his dad that said he would always love him. And he asked his son to remember a story; a story allegedly told by a grandfather to his grandson about two wolves inside of us that are always at war with each other. One wolf represents kindness, bravery, and love. The other represents greed, hatred, and fear.

The grandson asked, "Which one wins?"

And the grandfather said, "The one you feed."

Now I've heard this story before. It has various attributions including, by the way, a Sunday School teacher who told that story at the Cherokee Baptist Church back in 1958. But hearing that story in the light of the life of this young man; hearing it as a plea by a father for a son to remember this story and to live his life in light of it; hearing it as a testimony about someone's life and hope for another; makes it a story I'm telling you now as a light in which to see my own life and your life and the world.

And if Pastor Ned is right that we live our lives in light of the stories we tell, what is it that are we are feeding with those stories?

Now let me just say that Matthew is telling his story of the Magi and Herod and Joseph as a more modern way to tell that older story of the Magi and Pharaoh and Moses.

Perhaps you remember that story:

Joseph of the technicolor dream coat is sold into slavery by his brothers and is taken to Egypt where, because of his dreams, he not only survives but becomes a ruler who is able to save those very same brothers who betrayed him.

Several hundred years later, a Pharaoh comes to power who sees all these Jewish slaves having children and he is afraid that they will take over, so he sends out an executive order that all boys born to Jewish parents will be killed.

But an Egyptian princess saves the life of little Moses, and surreptitiously, she raises him as her own until Moses, as an adult, “comes out” as a Hebrew and defies Pharaoh and the Magicians of Pharaoh’s court and leads his people out of slavery into freedom and into the dream of a new homeland.

So Matthew is telling his story of Jesus in light of the story of Moses. Joseph is the descendant of that other Joseph. The role of Pharaoh is being played by Herod. And the Magi of Pharaoh’s court are now the Magi from the East who show up in Herod’s throne room, having followed that star so that they can come to worship the one they call the “king of the Jews.”

Matthew is telling the story of Jesus in the light of that earlier story about Moses because he is trying to feed this connection between the two.

But Matthew isn’t just making a connection between that new story and the older one because the Magi in the Moses story are the bad guys and the Magi in the Jesus story are the good guys. In other words, Matthew isn’t just making a connection with that old story, he’s using that story to make a NEW connection. He is feeding this vision that imagines a world where the ones we thought were the villains of the old story turn out to be crucial to the telling of a new one.

Perhaps Matthew is telling this story of the Magi – these astrologers, these star-gazers – as a way to make a connection with an even older story about Abraham and Sarah who are distressed that they still – at a very old age - are without children. And one night God comes to them and tells them to pull back those tent flaps and to go out and look at the night sky and to see all those stars. “Your children,” God says, “will be like the stars of the sky and through you all the nations of the earth will be blessed.”

Maybe Matthew is telling this story about the Magi and the star to feed those connections we have with all the world.

You know there was a time, back in the 70s, when it was not uncommon to meet someone and, somewhere in the introductions, one of you would ask: “So, what’s your sign?”

I was never one to put much stock in astrology but I got asked that question enough times that it was just easier to tell people that I am a Sagittarian – as is, by the way, Patrick, my mother, John F. Kennedy, Tina Turner, Britney Spears, Jane Fonda, Phil Donahue, Samuel L. Jackson, and Brad Pitt (who also, as it turns out, happens to be a Baptist).

It’s pretty hard, on the face of it, to see what this group has in common. And that’s part, I think, of what is so compelling about astrology – by looking at the stars, we can see connections we do not otherwise see.

I want to live my life in the light of those kinds of stories that feed that connection. Not just the automatic ones. Or the ones that I can easily see or might take for granted. I want to live my life in the light of the stars.

Matthew, I think, is telling his story of the Magi and the stars as a way of feeding that connection we have with all the world.

And we get a hint of that because it's not just the Joseph of the Moses story and the Joseph of the Jesus story who have dreams. These strangers, these outsiders, these villains of that older story, these Magi have them too: "Being warned in a dream," Matthew says, "not to return to Herod, they went back home another way."

Josephs' dreams the Magi's dream have something in common: both are a warning and end up being an act of resistance. The Magi do not "report" to Herod's court as they had been told. They head home by another way.

Perhaps we can't tell the stories of our dreams without also telling the stories of our nightmares. Every time I read this story I am cut right to the heart by the part about Rachel weeping for her children because they were no more.

Several years ago I noticed the text says that Rachel was weeping for her children and "she refused to be consoled." It is not only that Rachel cannot be consoled. Or that she will not be consoled. But that she REFUSES to be consoled. She refuses to be pacified or shut up or to let this atrocity to be ignored.

I'm beginning to believe the only hope we have for whatever dream we dream for ourselves and for our world requires that we refuse to be consoled in the face of injustice; refuse to be pacified by the threat of violence; refuse to be shut up by the forces that would destroy our lives and the lives of our children.

There's that story later in Matthew (15.21-28) about the Canaanite woman who comes to Jesus for the healing of her daughter and the disciples say, "Send her away because she keeps shouting at us; she isn't even one of us." But the woman keeps it up. She refuses to be consoled. And finally Jesus says to her, "Great is your faith" and heals her daughter.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all point to these women who move the promise of good news forward by refusing to be consoled.

It's in that spirit, I think, that women – and men - all around the country will be marching in a couple weeks. They are continuing this tradition of refusing to be consoled or pacified or marginalized by the forces that would kill their dreams and the dreams of their children.

Let me be clear. I don't want to live my life in the light of those stories that only feed my anger. There's enough of those. I want to live my life in the light of those stories that feed my dreams; that inspire my hope.

Because, ultimately, what I am dreaming is home. Pastor Ned was right to say that the unfolding story of our life together is about "home." Not the Hallmark ideal. Not those places where we store our baggage. But the place we dream where connections are so real and so unbreakable and so generous that the only possible analogy in the vocabulary of dreams is that there is no place like it. "There's no place like home."

The Magi discover that sometimes you have to get there another way. And eventually Joseph discovers that he can't go home again. The story says that, "after being warned in a dream, Joseph went away to the district of Galilee and there they made their home in a town called Nazareth."

Several years ago I was at a New Year celebration with refugees from Burma. The story some of these refugees have to tell can be the stuff of nightmares. But I will never forget what one of their leaders said that night: "Let us step into the new year to grasp the first fruit of our dreams."

It struck me then that there is a connection between home and dreams. You might not be able to get there without going another way. You might discover that you can't go home again. But I want to live my life in the light of those stories that feed this dream of home.

I am convinced that Pastor Ned is right. We live our lives in light of the stories we have to tell. And the question is: What are those stories feeding?

I'm making a resolution this morning.

I want to live my life in the light of stories that feed the connections I have with the world.

I want to live my life in the light of stories that don't just feed my anger but inspire my hope.

I want to live my life in the light of those stories that feed that dream of home ... because that old song is true:  
Through many dangers, toils and snares  
I have already come,  
It's grace that brought me safe this far  
And grace will lead me home.

We are marching  
We are singing  
We are living  
We are sending  
In that light this morning.

And today, if you hear that voice, do not harden your hearts.

#### NOTES

The lyrics by Ariel Ramirez (1921-2010) are part of his Argentinian folk piece, *Navidad Nuestra*. There is a website dedicated to the two wolves story at [www.oneyoufeed.net](http://www.oneyoufeed.net).