

“Another Way”  
Matthew 2:1-12  
The First Sunday after the Epiphany  
January 7, 2024  
Rev. Anita Peebles, Seattle First Baptist Church

**Scripture**     Matthew 2:1-12 (translated by Rev. Dr. Wil C. Gafney)

Now Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of King Herod, suddenly sages from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the one born king of the Judeans? For we have seen his star at its ascent and have come to reverence him.” When King Herod heard this, he was shaken, and all Jerusalem with him; then calling together all the chief priests and religious scholars of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah would be born. They said to him,

“In Bethlehem of Judea; for it has been written by the prophet:  
And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
By no means are 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 sages and learned from them the time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go, search diligently for the child, and when you have found him bring me word so that I may also go and reverence him.” When they had heard the king, they left, and there suddenly was the star that they had seen at its ascent going before them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they rejoiced; their joy was exuberant. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they fell down and revered him. Then, opening their treasure, 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.

Each Sunday during advent in our Intergenerational Godly Play time, we wondered, “who will show us the way to Bethlehem?” Today on Epiphany Sunday, we answer, “the magi following the star show us the way.”

For millennia, humans have been looking at the stars, watching the stars, and been guided by the stars. Travelers and explorers throughout time have looked to the stars for navigation, noting the position of the stars and the time of the year and their location in the world so that they could find their way to their destination. The magi followed in this tradition.

The Bible is not specific about how many magi there were, or exactly what the identity of these wise ones were. Legend tells us that there were three, and other stories even give us names: Caspar, Balthazar and Melchior. They may have been astrologers or magicians or scholars or Zoroastrian spiritualists—we don't know. Today, we understand that anyone could be a wise one—someone who makes meaning out of mystery, who explores the big questions of the universe, who looks for signs of the Divine in the everyday.

Though we don't know a lot about the magi, what we do know provides a story that we have been trying to wrap our heads around for two thousand years. Yes, we know about the gifts they brought, and we enjoy the jokes and memes about how useful or not they may have been to the small family in Nazareth. We know that they didn't arrive in time for them to be present in nativity scenes, and that it probably took many months for them to follow the star from wherever they were coming from east of Judea. But we also know that they acted with powerful dissent against a tyrant with the intent to kill innocents and assert his kingship.

The sages followed the star to Judea, and then rational thought took over somewhat. They had heard stories along the way of a king who was born who would change everything, of a child who was sent from God, of a very human event with cosmic implications such that even the stars changed their courses. And thinking that a child born to be king would be found in the seat of power, they went to Jerusalem, the governing city in Judea.

There the sages from the east met Herod the Great, the vassal ruler of Judea, put into power by the Roman Empire. The story goes that Herod was drunk with power, that he was threatened by the whispers about a king of the Judeans recently born, and that upon the sages' visit, Herod saw an opportunity. He directed the magi to find the child and then tell Herod the child's location.

The historical record tells us that Herod the Great was a ruthless leader, even killing several of his family members out of fear of usurping his power. So today, we know what the magi didn't: that Herod's claim of wanting to revere the child called a king was a thinly-veiled plot to destroy the child.

So the magi go on their way, following the star to Nazareth, where they found the toddler Jesus and gave him their gifts and knelt in reverence before him. Then came the choice. Would they obey Herod's order to give up the location of the child, or not?

See, the magi didn't have to listen to Herod...they were not his subjects, they came from far away. Presumably they could just leave and they wouldn't get in any trouble if they disobeyed him and then fled out of his jurisdiction.

But they also didn't have any reason to disobey. It wouldn't have been consequential to them to tell Herod where the child was. They could have returned to the east via Jerusalem and relayed the information and gone on with their lives.

They couldn't know that they were almost party to murder—or did they?

The scripture tells us that God warned them in a dream not to return to Herod, and so the magi listened to that dream. They trusted their gut instinct, that little nagging feeling in the back of

their head that told them: that dream was right, Herod wants to do the child harm, don't give up his location.

The magi didn't tell Herod where they could find baby Jesus, essentially saving his life. They refused to be complicit in the death of a child.

Complicity in the death of children is shocking and horrifying and sickening.

Right now, here in the USA, we are faced with that reality. Our country, our government, our citizenry, we—are complicit in the deaths of children.

Children killed by gun violence because our political leaders lack the will and our fellow citizens lack the morality to take action to protect kids and prevent easily preventable deaths.

Children killed by poverty, without food, without homes, without medical care, because the widening wealth gap and trickle-down economics in the context of rampant capitalism doesn't trickle all the way down to children.

Children killed because of the lack of acceptance from homophobic and transphobic adults, either ending their own lives or being targeted for violence or neglected by needed medical care.

Children in Gaza—over 9,000 by now-- killed by bombs made with USA taxpayer dollars; killed by the lack of medical care or clean water or food; 150 babies born each day into a world where they are, according to Dr. Annie Sparrow, a pediatrician used to practicing medicine in war zones, “many [are] pre-orphaned, it is as if they inherit a congenital affliction—a destiny to suffer, to live a constrained life, due to events that they have no ability to effect.”<sup>1</sup> And even more trapped under the rubble, a gruesome nativity scene.

Children in Israel, some still held hostage or waiting for their loved ones to be released, living in fear.

Children in the Congo, in Sudan, in Ethiopia, in Afghanistan, in Colombia, in Ukraine, their lives forever changed by war.

Children of color, disproportionately jailed, victims of the school to prison pipeline.

Children who are Muslim, being targeted and killed because of unchecked islamophobia.

Children who are Jewish, being targeted and killed because of entrenched antisemitism.

Children's innocence and childhood being killed by the relentless violence in the news, on social media, in the world.

Children with names, with stories, with favorite colors and favorite sports, whose childhood ends too soon.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/06/opinion/gaza-israel-deaths.html>

Like the magi, we have a choice—to be complicit or to refuse to comply. To follow the path that has been laid for us by the tyrant’s order, or to find another way?

The magi’s choice to disobey Herod reminds me of Mahatma Gandhi’s words, “Non-cooperation with evil is as much a duty as is cooperation with good.”

We can choose, too.

We can choose not to look away. We can choose not to comply with unjust policies, laws and orders. We can choose to speak up about where our taxpayer money goes. We can choose where we put our money. We can choose to advocate for peace, for an end to violence, for practical policy change. We can choose to register our moral outrage in letters and calls to our lawmakers, in conversations with loved ones, in rally and protest, in the ballot box and beyond-- and behave accordingly.

Though the choice may be different from what some expect of us, from how we thought our lives would go, from what everyone around us is doing, the stories of our faith teach us that the magi chose another way and so can we.

Friends, being people of faith who choose another way is not new. The legacy of Baptists and dissent is long. Roger Williams preached “soul freedom,” challenging the idea of the state religion could dictate one’s personal moral authority, and was thrown out of the Massachusetts colony, only to go on to found Rhode Island. John Leland advocated so strongly for religious freedom for ALL—not for some—that he influenced the framers of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. Maria W. Stewart, a Black woman who grew up as an indentured servant, preached publicly against the double standard of rights guaranteed by the US government. Civil Rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer was known to police as a “troublemaker” in her associations with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and her tireless work for rights for all races.

The history of *this church*’s dissenting activity is long—there have been times within the last 154 years, I’ve been told, that saw police or military officials in the balcony of this sanctuary, listening carefully to the pastor’s anti-war messages. Dr. Harold Jensen is described in our 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary History Book as a “pacifist, not a passivist” and quoted as saying from the pulpit that “war was absolute evil because of its ‘inevitable disruption of the essential fellowship, the family of God.’” (76) Dr. Jensen joined picket lines alongside the Seattle Committee Against Fascist Aggression to halt shipments of scrap metal to Japan in 1939. In a 1950 Seattle Daily Times article, Dr. Jensen stated that the Church’s “primary responsibility” was “the advancement of the cause of world peace.” (85) Church member and peace activist Alice Franklin Bryant unequivocally supported peace and reconciliation and was outspoken about opposing nuclear arms. (100) Another memorable justice-centered pastor was Guz Hintz, a thoughtful and engaged leader who advocated for racial equity and for the church to be involved in the life of the city and those who were being crushed by the pursuit of profit. (105) And of course Rod Romney was instrumental in moving the church to be welcoming and inclusive of lesbian and gay people far earlier than many churches were, and eventually resulting in this church collaborating to begin the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists. Our church history provides many powerful reminders, impossible to list all of them here, that another way of living and working

and worshipping in this world is possible, with peace and advocacy for all of God's family at the center.

In her book *Thus Far on the Way: Toward a Theology of Child Advocacy*, Dr. Eileen Lindner writes that the Church is particularly well-positioned to advocate for children, those local and those around the world. "In a time such as this, we as the Church must declare that it is the hour for freedom for our children. We must proclaim that the Church will be a sanctuary for children and make it so." Using the language of the 1980s Sanctuary Movement, she writes, "The Church can't be just one more voice, weighing the expediency of this policy or that policy. We must be they who say children are our [national] treasure, our most valuable [national] resources. They aren't just our [nation's] treasure, they are God's treasure, and God will hold us accountable for how we are stewards of those children entrusted to us. And we, as an institution, will stand for them....the Church has a particular vocation to get next to childhood and walk it home, to get right next to each child and see them into adulthood, the adulthood for which they were created."<sup>2</sup>

The choir has sung the powerful anthem a few times over the past couple years: "there are no other people's children." That is what resonates with me as my heart aches with the knowledge of how much I, and we, are trapped in complicity with violence. The children shot in their school in Iowa, the young people in the Youth Detention Center, the babies born in Gaza, the children held as hostages, the children living on the streets, the children dying of hunger, the trans children in Texas—they are not other people's children. They are our own.

So where do we go from here? How will we find our way home to the Holy? Is it by following the paths laid out for us by the political leaders corrupted by money and enacting double standards? Is it by listening always to the loudest voices pressuring us against criticizing our leaders? Is it by living as sleepwalkers, dissociated from the pain in the world so that we can get through the day? Is it by taking care of ourselves and our own and neglecting all else?

The work of freedom and justice operate by a different set of rules than the powers and principalities. Dr. Lindner wrote of this difference this way: "the fact of the matter is we will not so much decide as discern. We will not so much calculate as consecrate. We will not so much evaluate as exalt. We will not copy the pattern of those around us—we will follow the pattern established by another."<sup>3</sup>

Beloved church, will we follow the magi's lead, and go home by another way? Will we realistically look at our surroundings and say to ourselves, "I know I can't change the whole world. But I can affect my corner, and I will do so every day. I will put my shoulder against the wheel of injustice and trust that others will be right there next to me. I will not be complicit in more death, but be as much of a co-conspirator with the God of Liberation as I can be"?

---

<sup>2</sup> Thus Far on the Way, 104

<sup>3</sup> Thus Far On the Way, (58).

Again, Dr. Eileen Lindner: “some years ago I read in a newspaper commentary that made the point that in aeronautical navigation one fixes one’s gaze upon the far horizon. To look at a point lower than the horizon is to land short of your goal, before you intend to. To look at a point above the horizon is never to land at all. Only if you fix your gaze just exactly at that far horizon do you bring the plane in safe and sound.”<sup>4</sup>

Though the magi were not traveling home via aircraft, I imagine they did fix their gaze on the horizon, on their goal, as they traversed a different road. And we, too, now must fix our gaze on the horizon, on our goal, so that we reach it together. In a world that is shortsighted and satisfied only by immediate gratification, that is variously distracted and entertained by the ever-spiralling news cycle, we need to see beyond ourselves to fix our vision on the horizon that is our goal. We need to raise our heads up from our preoccupation with superficial righteousness and fix our gaze on the star’s light that will lead us into an encounter with the Holy that will change our lives. We can abandon the path of apathy, the path of helplessness, the path of navel-gazing, and we can join those already on the way of divesting from cooperating with evil. The magi show us the way.

Another way is possible. Let’s go together, for the sake of Jesus and all our children.

## **Benediction**

Theologian Charles West said, “we turn to God for help when our foundations are shaking only to find out it is God who’s shaking them.”<sup>5</sup>

May the shaking of our foundations move us to cooperate with God in shaping our world into a place of justice and wholeness for all God’s children.

---

<sup>4</sup> Thus Far on the Way (100).

<sup>5</sup> (Thus Far on the Way 102)