

January 4, 2026

SCRIPTURE READING

First Reading Matthew 2:1-12, 16-18 (NRSVue)

1 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi from the east came to Jerusalem, **2** asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star in the east and have come to pay him homage.” **3** When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him, **4** and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. **5** They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet:

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.’ ”

7 Then Herod secretly called for the magi and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. **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.” **9** When they had heard the king, they set out, and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen in the east, until it stopped over the place where the child was. **10** When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. **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. **12** And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road...

16 When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the 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. **17** Then what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:

18 “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.”

Second Reading Proverbs 4:1-9 (NLT)

- 1 My children, listen when your father corrects you.
Pay attention and learn good judgment,
- 2 for I am giving you good guidance.
Don't turn away from my instructions.
- 3 For I, too, was once my father's son,
tenderly loved as my mother's only child.
- 4 My father taught me,
"Take my words to heart.
Follow my commands, and you will live.
- 5 Get wisdom; develop good judgment.
Don't forget my words or turn away from them.
- 6 Don't turn your back on wisdom, for she will protect you.
Love her, and she will guard you.
- 7 Getting wisdom is the wisest thing you can do!
And whatever else you do, develop good judgment.
- 8 If you prize wisdom, she will make you great.
Embrace her, and she will honor you.
- 9 She will place a lovely wreath on your head;
she will present you with a beautiful crown."

Sermon Title: Fear Doesn't Stop Us

Those worshipping here in this sanctuary came in physically from a world frozen in a little snow and ice. I've had to relearn that January in Michigan feels like a time of hibernation – unless you have the option to leave for a warmer climate for a few weeks or months like some of our snowbirds worshipping with us on line this morning! It sure felt like hibernation for me most of last week, when I had my "stay-cation," watching football and basketball, binging Netflix series, reading a good mystery novel ... and cleaning out closets and organizing my personal life! That was a hibernation, but now I feel prepared for the New Year, and have space – physical and mental – to ponder what the new calendar year might bring, ready to look for signs of the inevitable change each new year brings.

But today isn't the new church year, as I've explained before. Our new church year began with the four Sundays that precede Christmas Eve. And today we end the liturgical Christmas season and look to a season of Ordinary Time, also called the season of Epiphany. The word "epiphany" comes from the Greek *epiphaneia* which means "appearance" or "manifestation" of God. In ancient

times, an epiphany meant either a visible manifestation of a god, or the solemn visit of a ruler venerated as a god. The Christmas stories of the birth of Immanuel that we've re-read the past couple of weeks declare the divine entry into our world; Epiphany examines the revelation of God to the world in the person and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. And the verses we read today help us to lean into this time of the church year to take part in the wisdom passed down through the ages that can help us look for signs of change that God is providing in the infant savior king, Jesus Christ.

Movement One

So, in this pivot time of the church year, we return to the words: "in the time of Herod" We heard about this time on Reign of Christ Sunday, looking at the Zechariah text in Matthew that begins with these words. We learned that the time of Herod was a time of fear, and in Advent we examined the nature of fear in our lives, and how our Christian faith counters that reactive human response with hope. The revelation of the Christ child continues with the story of Herod and the magi, wise persons that crossed from the direction of Babylon or Persia into Judea, following a star that their astrological charts and intuitive wisdom connected to the predictions of a new king that would be born to rule not just a group of people or a geographical region, but would rule the world. They felt so confident that they probably spent the good part of a year making their way across that region to confirm what they knew within themselves – something special had happened, a divine revelation had occurred, and the child was something they *needed* to physically experience with sight, sound, smell, touch. And on their way to this encounter, they encountered an earthly ruler, Herod.

We've already learned that the time of Herod gave good cause for fear: he was a treacherous man. He was calculating, lied without restraint, manipulated religion for his own self-serving ends, and got rid of anyone who dared question his right to rule, even through murder. History shows he was innately cruel, and couldn't abide any challenge to his power. As a result – his popularity diminished, and people mocked this puppet leader the wealthy of Rome created. He was so fearful of losing his control, so desperate to maintain his wealth and power, that he felt threatened by these foreigners who believed in a prophecy about a baby born – because they also thought it was to be the next king of Israel.

And so Herod did what he always did. He cajoled and said all the right words to their face, claiming to have their same intentions. He posed as a man of faith, expressed his own desire to worship this child, trying to trick them into revealing where this future ruler lived: "when you have found him, bring me

word so I may also go and pay him homage.” And he plotted to get rid of this next rival to his accumulating power.

So we know who Herod is. We recognize him from these origin stories of Jesus, and we recognize him in the manifestation of human power in our own time. But – who were the magi? How do these spiritual seers help us to see the Christ child and the direction we need to go in our lives? How do they send a message of hope?

The Greek word *magos*, or its plural *majoi*, refers to a magician, astrologer, or a religious priest; it can also refer to a scholar, sage or wise person. It's in the plural in Matthew 2, so we know there was more than one of them, but the assumption of three comes from the three gifts listed, not from the exact number of magi that made the trip in the words of Scripture. Over the centuries tradition has imagined names for them: Melchior, Caspar, and Balthazar, names that have their origin from Persia, India and Arabia, indicating not just one point of origin but from multiple foreign lands. We sing hymns stating they were kings – but that isn't scriptural either. Over the centuries the interpretation has gone from seeing them as maybe visitors from royal courts representing foreign kings to being the kings themselves. Again, an imaginative leap.

Over the years, in sermons and bible stories and paintings and sculpture, so much of the story of the magi is imaginative interpretation, expanding on the few descriptive words used to describe these visitors. This isn't bad: the creative mind God gifted us with likes to create more back story, to flesh out additional meaning into this story of another revelation of the holy birth, this time revealed to foreigners in distant lands. But by acknowledging these creative imaginings about the magi, it creates room in our minds for another imaginative interpretation of these figures posed in a reflection by Rev. Dr. Boyung Lee. The word *majoi* is rooted in ancient Persian, and in the earliest times it referred to a priestly class in the Zoroastrianism tradition in ancient Persia, which helped shape Judaism. These *majoi* were a priestly class that included both men *and* women. So what if, instead of imagining three male royal priests, or even kings, – what if the Magi were women?

If we imagine the magi as women, as the artist whose painting adorns the cover of the bulletin today, the story shifts. Rev. Lee wrote this: “Instead of royal men, we see wise women crossing boundaries of religion, ethnicity, culture” – just like the women in Jesus' genealogy at the beginning of Matthew, Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba – “to stand in solidarity with a marginalized teen mother and her child. The gifts then don't symbolize an economic exchange between two

powerful rulers, but a recognition of the true nature of another woman's child's destiny. If we imagine them women, their journey becomes not only homage – worship – but also “a radical accompaniment, a feminine embodiment of God's epiphany” in human form. Mary in her time of quiet caring for her firstborn, may have welcomed into her home not strange men, but women whose common experience of birthing may have allowed them to communicate in ways that different language and position would otherwise have prevented. And part of their gifts also foreshadowed a woman's task: myrrh was a spice used to anoint/embalm bodies after death in the Near East, and so these women would have been bringing this strange gift to this new mother, preparing her with the tools to bury her child in the future. Maybe this same myrrh was given by Jesus' mother, and was carried by Mary Magdalene and the other female disciples to the tomb that early Easter morning after Jesus' crucifixion to anoint his body? And when I imagine this story as wise females, I now see a connection to other women in Israel's history who defied a powerful man – the midwives that defied Pharaoh's order to kill the first born Israelite male children, and as a result kept infant Moses alive. Those wise women also heard a different voice, and overcame their fear to take action to keep a future savior alive, keeping alive the hope for release from enslavement by Egypt that Moses as a future savior held out to the people of Israel. Imagining them women gives us a new revelation on what was being revealed in their encounter with the Christ child.

In the story of the magi, we have two contrasting responses to fear: scripture says Herod's response to the wise persons' inquiry was fear, “and all of Jerusalem with him,” fear arising out of losing control, power, status. And we see the contrasting response to fear in the magi's hope, traveling thousands of miles to see and hear and smell and touch it, to move past personal fear to let that encounter with the incarnated divine transform themselves. And listening to their own wisdom, knowing when to ignore power's voice, knowing when to listen to the wisdom God sends in the prickling of conscience, the compassion that arises when looking at a woman and a child, allowed them to act on hope that kept evil power from getting its way.

This reimagining of the magi as women resonates even more when we consider the passages on wisdom throughout the Old Testament. In the Psalms and Proverbs, the word “wisdom” in Hebrew is in the grammatical feminine. So we hear it translated as the pronoun “she” in the personification of wisdom. Proverbs 4 says:

- 6** Don't turn your back on wisdom, for *she* will protect you.
Love *her*, and *she* will guard you.
- 7** Getting wisdom is the wisest thing you can do!
And whatever else you do, develop good judgment.
- 8** If you prize wisdom, *she* will make you great.
Embrace *her*, and *she* will honor you.
- 9** *She* will place a lovely wreath on your head;
she will present you with a beautiful crown.

And so – it isn't that much of a stretch to imagine wise women overcoming fear to cross the desert with gifts for a newborn king, gifts that speak to his divinity and humanity. Wise women that dismissed their own fears to experience something new and sit alongside it in solidarity. Wise women who saw through the false religious facade that tried to hide a deathly plan. Wise women listening to the inner voice of wisdom to head in another direction in order to get home. Their hopeful journey, and hope for a different outcome than Herod was planning, wisely guided them past their fears into a hope for a transformed world. And in their example of wisdom, we see how wisdom's light exposes illegitimate power, keeping fear from having the last word, keeping fear from stopping us in following the path walked by Jesus that we're asked to embrace and follow ourselves.

The season of Epiphany – what does it mean to us? It's not an empty space holder between Christmas and Lent. For Christians, Christmas marks the coming of God to us; Epiphany celebrates the appearance of the Lord in the midst of humanity, the manifestation of God's love for us by his examples of healing, compassion, love. In our celebration of Christmas and Epiphany we rejoice in the dawning and the arising Light out of human darkness. And Epiphany not only discloses the Savior to the world but also calls on that world to reveal Christ, to be witnesses to God's true Light. The timeless mystery of the incarnation, God in flesh, is meant to lead us forward to show and tell the world of Christ as God's gift of grace and salvation for all persons. Some call this ongoing epiphany, our revealing Christ to others, the true work of Christmas.

On the Saturday after Christmas, we woke up here in St. Clair county to a world encased in ice. Walking outside, you could hear the crackling and snapping of the weight of this frozen rain taking down twigs, branches, limbs. I went to an early breakfast downtown with my mother, and the reflection of the street lights backlit the trees along the streets. The ice in those lights was very apparent due

to heavy cloud cover that morning; it was still pretty dim even after 8 a.m. But as we headed back to my apartment after our meal, there was a slight lifting of the heavy cloud mantle over the Canadian horizon in the east, letting in a peek of the morning's rising sun. Driving through Pine Grove Park, we saw those rays of morning sunlight hit the ice-encased trees – and it **lit them on fire**. The tops of the trees looked like a match had been set to them, with the top third glowing orange like a candle flame. It was the most spectacular natural phenomena I've seen in a while, a divine gift of beauty that made me pull the car over to the side of the road and sit in awe at what God had revealed for us. A manifestation of God's creative power, reframing the image of flames that keeps coming at us in the past days and weeks – the orange flames of a nightclub burning in Switzerland, the orange flames of a bombed foreign city lifting into the night – turning images of orange flames that bring on fear, into an epiphany of hope. Because in that illuminated ice I was beholding the wisdom - the knowing - that this season will pass; encased in the winter branches lies, hibernating, the future buds that will come out in the warmth of spring. The wisdom that the bitter cold of the ice of fear melts in the warmth of the wise teachings of The Son - of God.

So in this coming season of Epiphany, keep looking God revealing the Christ Child. Ignore the voices that want you to go backward and succumb to your fears, and follow the voice of God's teaching manifested going forward. Going forward the path is often unknown, but in hope we stay focused on our true home in God's kin-dom finally being seen here on earth. Hope of a kingdom of love and compassion, tolerance and acceptance, weapons turned to plowshares, a kingdom where it's not money and power that gives entrance but gentleness and self-sacrifice. And with that bright shining hope of God's promised kingdom, fear can't stop us.

Amen.