

Matthew 2:1-18

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Marietta Macy

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Go Another Route

I know it seems like Christmas is well and over, but once you've been to Palestine in January and get to celebrate Christmas after Christmas with denomination after denomination, I've really leaned into celebrating it all month. But we are in the season of epiphany as a church. We have concluded the story of Jesus's birth that we know very well, the journey to Nazareth, angels, shepherds, a little drummer boy maybe, all that. Mary and Joseph would have every right to think that they could settle into parenting a baby now that the newborn chaos had subsided, as we settle into a new year. But with the appearance of the magi, and the dreams of warning, they settle instead into a lifetime of chaos at the hands of human powers beyond their control.

With the visit of the magi, we are visited by knowledge of the world Jesus was born into. A reminder that as long ago as it seems, as different as we might think things were, Jesus himself was born into a global society. We have a tendency to place the land of the Bible on an isolated land mass, in a galaxy far far away, once upon a time. But there are olive trees older than this birth story still growing and producing fruit in Palestine. And the birth of our savior did not occur in a vacuum, free from politics and international influences. However different we may well feel this time is from us, it's a reminder that wise people have always shown us that there is another way possible. Once we have learned, we must grow, and go back to our own homes by a different route.

As a reminder that Jesus was born into a real time and place, and global society, we learn more about the magi from looking at the real cultures from which they may have come, since this is their only appearance in the biblical text. They are Zoroastrians we believe so kind of scientist; a sort of mystical religious astronomers who tracked and interpreted the movements of the stars particularly. Their star reading and study had foretold to them multiple Messiahs essentially, they believe that they were going to be multiple miracle births of prophets who would speak for God and speak to the people in all of these places to give them the wisdom that they needed to be who they're created to be. They've come seeking Jesus because they believed him to be one of these births. The magi are not Jewish, they don't stick around and become Christian. They are completely other, foreigners from a distant land with no kin or ties to the land- but in true Palestinian fashion, they are welcomed into the home of Mary and Joseph's, which is also likely a relatives (remember they're still in Bethlehem after their journey from Nazareth.

These are educated, affluent people. I say “people” because we assume that they were men but in a lot of cultures in the world there would have been educated women at the time too, and there also very may well have been more than three. I know that’s what we see in our nativity scenes and in our postcards and everything, but these figures are collectively representing a group of wise people.

They follow the path that’s designed for them at this place in their life and meet with Herod, meet with the ruler, though a very brutal, cruel, selfish and self-centered person, he still holds power. They’ve done the established thing, followed expected procedures, even cross culturally. After their audience with him, they do make it over to Bethlehem to meet baby Jesus and the family. This experience, sealed with a dream, gives them a fuller picture of what’s really going on here for the people, who Herod is, and how they cannot return by the established route that power had set before them. They choose to follow that wisdom and guidance revealed by God in a dream and go home by a different road, leaving Herod grasping at the wisdom and knowledge they took with them.

For some added tension to the story, we should know that Herod himself is Jewish, he’s a Jewish ruler, but he is not from the house and line of David so this creates deeper insecurities in him because he’s following the Jewish prophetic scriptures that someone from the house of David is going to become king. This is why it’s retold in scripture everywhere that Jesus is born in Bethlehem, the city of David. It’s been prophesied and expected that he is going to become this mighty king and fall in line with somebody who has a power example like Herod does. He doesn’t in the end; we know he rides in on the donkey versus a war horse, he rides in with palms spread before him by the people versus fancy garlands and flowers, he forgives those who crucify him instead of seeking vengeance with the almighty power of God. Jesus continues from this moment of his birth to his resurrection to upend those notions of power and privilege. And to remind us who really has power in God’s creation-long term.

When the magi don’t follow the path that was laid for them, Herod explodes and massacres. We don’t know how many infants, but many, up to two years old, so babies and toddlers learning to speak and walk, children that had full lives and full families concerned about them. They were completely wiped out because of his own insecurity, his own rage and his clinging again to power. This brutal explosion of a response we see of an insecure man, who knew that he was grasping at power, is nothing foreign to us. This is one of the moments that much to our heartbreak, an old old story becomes very current. The horrors of our time are fresh in shape and color, but they are not new.

It's a path designed for us too, like the magi, we know what we're supposed to do. We are supposed to do things, especially as Presbyterians, decently and in order, in the correct way, in the socially acceptable way. Don't rock the boat too much, don't ruffle too many feathers, don't risk the status quo, the negative peace that is not peace but the absence of disruption must be protected at all costs -- tens of thousands of Palestinian children for example. Don't put yourself at risk in this precarious system, especially if your heritage or identity or gender are the ones left out of the design. It's a dangerous place to be, when wisdom comes into conflict with insecurity, weakness, and prejudice, but God did not create us to be cowards. There is nothing righteous, devout, or even respectably about falling in line with a system that does not allow justice.

The magi, the wise people, know that no kingdom, no state or country built on oppression is going to last. They are a house built on sand, on a weak, cracked, unevenly poured foundation, and they will not last, they cannot by their very nature last.

As we celebrated Martin Luther King Day recently, I was reminded of so many of his prophetic warnings and advice to us, particularly about the white moderate being the most dangerous versus the outright and undisguised, hatred and racism of the Ku Klux Klan and others. What's more dangerous in the long term is the white moderate who has this false peace and stability mindset that leads us to create systems where none of us are truly safe or can ever be at peace. And when we as Americans are living in a country that has systems designed by the values of colonial white supremacy- when we engage in global politics, we end up perpetrating the worst of the white moderate globally.

We will continue irrelevant debates about two states and Israeli settlements- ignoring the one state reality physically entrenched by walls and checkpoints. We'll critique all the forms of resistance of the Palestinians- as if we in the US are moral and strategic supervisors, not legendary preparators of genocide and slavery ourselves. We'll debate Israeli politics and pretend like their elections could ever make a difference, send billions in military "aid" to Israel and a fraction of that in humanitarian aid to Palestinians so they can rebuild homes and infrastructure destroyed by the bombs and bulldozers we paid for. It's the perfect recipe for a never ending catastrophe, by design, a design that only profits the Herods of our world, results in the mass slaughter of precious human life, and calls us to respond like the magi. As wise people we have to forge a new path, go another route, toward justice and safety for all God's creation.

And sometimes that means not following the law, not following the status quo, not following cruel and unjust orders from insecure, inhumane "leaders" who are

grasping at power. A type of power that can only exist by taking away someone else's. The displacement and ethnic cleansing of the indigenous people of this land was "legal." Slavery, owning and abusing other humans in this country was legal, Jim Crow was law, and firing a woman for being a woman is law again as of last week. We are at a crossroads of world events colliding, with real life consequences for the people in our families, for the people who we have adopted as families. We owe it to them, ourselves, and most of all our Creator to listen to where she is calling us to take risks to stand with those people, stand up for those people, and remember that being in that suffering with them, while we may have privilege to escape it, is the kind of life that this Jesus who was born to us, Emmanuel calls us to.

In the coming year, look ahead to see where God is calling us to follow a different path than we may have thought was set before us, and our life may have set us up for. It may not be the safest. It may not be the clearest, but Jesus is a leader and a teacher that takes us on unmarked paths through the desert for spiritual fulfillment, paths through "enemy territory" where he makes friends out of strangers and foreigners. We need to go to those unmarked and those, potentially dangerous, rough and rugged places in our own society, our own communities and families to hear where God is speaking.

Wisdom in conflict with power – when following God's directions – will lead us to go another way. As scary as it might seem, the gift in this uncertainty is the certainty that we don't have to go alone. The magi did not have to go alone and neither do we. We need to be in solidarity with the oppressed, but also with our communities working against that oppression on our own journeys. I pray that as we enter this year, this era of our nation's history looking for our own epiphany as we see where God is calling us.

We aren't just living through history; we are making history. And as wise people who follow a wise teacher, we can make new roads where there were not roads before. Because we are the people of a God who makes living things out of dead ends. And even as we are remembering the beginning of Jesus' life, we can be reminded and comforted already knowing the end of his story. There is always life and resurrection at the end of our journeys, and company along the new route we are taking.