

McCabe United Methodist Church

“New Year, No Fear?”

Sermon on Matthew 2:1-12 (Epiphany Celebration; 12/31/16-1/1/17)

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Holy God, you give us words, you guide our thoughts, and you fill our hearts. May these words I speak be pleasing to your ears, may our thoughts be formed in your image, and may our hearts be ever tuned to you; in Jesus name we pray. Amen.

This past week has been a blur of Christmas worship services, blizzard-related cabin fever, and *Star Wars*. My parents were in town for over a week and, as we were snowed-in, we took advantage of my husband's 55-inch television with accompanying surround sound system: we watched *all seven episodes* of the *Star Wars* saga.

These past many days, my thoughts have filled with Jedi and Siths ... Skywalkers, droids, clones, and storm troopers ... empires and rebellions ... the Force with its light and dark sides.

My thoughts were filled with *Star Wars*, and, frankly, the fictional world of *Star Wars* seemed very appropriate alongside thoughts of today's Scripture reading from Matthew chapter two.

I had seen many of the *Star Wars* films years ago, but a couple of them were new to me this past week.

As you may or may not know, in the fictional universe of *Star Wars*, there is an epic battle happening between good and evil... and this battle is fueled by what's called “the Force.” The Force is a mysterious, spiritual energy with both a light and a dark side.

Throughout the *Star Wars* saga, we are meant to be rooting for the folks working to harness the *light* side of the force – the Jedi and their sympathizers.

While my family was watching through the *Star Wars* movies on our snow days this past week, one line in particular struck me as informing not only today's Scripture reading from Matthew 2, but also as informing our human condition.

In one of the earlier episodes of *Star Wars*, the Jedi master Yoda is speaking with a young recruit named Anakin. As is the Jedi way, Yoda can sense that there is much fear in Anakin's mind and heart.

As a word of warning about fear, Yoda says to Anakin, "Fear is the path to the dark side". Fear leads to anger... anger leads to hate... hate leads to suffering."¹ Isn't that so true, so often, of our human condition?

Fear: the path to the dark side. Fear that we aren't good enough. Fear that we aren't worthy. Fear we will lose *someone*. Fear we will lose *something*. Fear we will lose power or control.

"Fear leads to anger... anger leads to hate... hate leads to suffering."

We see this played-out very clearly in, and immediately after, today's Scripture reading from Matthew chapter 2.

In Matthew chapter 2, we get a story that is familiar to many of us: the story of the Magi's visit to the young Jesus and his parents.

Sometimes we call them "the wise men", sometimes we call them "the three kings" - like the song - but, here, I'll refer to them by another name we sometimes use: the Magi.

The Magi were astrologers from somewhere in the Middle East, not too terribly far from Israel - perhaps from the ancient land of Babylon. Being astrologers, the Magi were trained to read signs in the stars.

Both Jewish and non-Jewish traditions at the time claimed that stars announced the birth of royalty; so, when the Magi saw Jesus' natal star appear in the heavens, they followed it westward to Jerusalem.

1 Quote from *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace*.

There, they asked around to find out what king might have been born to cause such a star to rise.

Now, an important piece of this story is that the land of Israel was, at the time, under the occupation of the Roman government and military.

Jesus' own people – the people of Israel, the Jewish people – had a long history of being attacked and occupied by outside nations and empires. The Jewish people also had a long history of having kings and of waiting for God to send them a Messiah... someone who would save them from the force of outside nations and who would officially establish the Jewish people as the “owners” of the land of Israel.

At the time of Jesus' birth, the Roman government was “in charge” of Israel and they had made a Jewish man named Herod a sort of “puppet king” to oversee the Jewish people in the area of Israel surrounding Jerusalem.

As the story goes, King Herod heard these Magi from the east had come to Jerusalem looking to worship a newborn Jewish king. This did not make him too happy. *He* was the Jewish king. He wanted to continue *being* the Jewish king.

King Herod was power-hungry and very fearful of losing his power. In fact, he was so fearful and so power-hungry that, when he heard about the birth of the baby Messiah, all of Jerusalem became fearful as well. King Herod's paranoia was so great that it trickled-out through the city.

(Have you ever been around someone whose irrational fears quickly turn into ugly, irrational behaviors that affect those around them in sometimes terrifying ways? That was King Herod.)

“Fear leads to anger... anger leads to hate... hate leads to suffering.”

Herod gathered some Jewish Bible scholars and found out from them that the Messiah – the ultimate Jewish king – was to be born in Bethlehem, just a few miles outside of Jerusalem. Then, not wanting to waste his own precious time hunting down the baby Messiah, Herod called the Magi to pay him a visit.

When the Magi arrived at Herod's, he told them to "Go to Bethlehem and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, let me know. I want to go and worship him too."

So, the Magi went to Bethlehem, found the baby Jesus, and joyfully worshiped him. As gifts, they gave him gold, frankincense, and myrrh – offerings fit for any king. Then, in a dream, the wise men were warned not to go back to Herod in Jerusalem. So, after worshiping the baby Jesus, and leaving their gifts, they went back to their own country "by another road" – without talking to King Herod.

That is the end of today's reading. However, this particular story isn't quite finished after the Magi leave Bethlehem to go home by another road.

See, there was a very specific reason Herod had wanted the wise men to return to tell him exactly where the baby Messiah was in Bethlehem. He was fearful he'd lose his power with the birth of this holy, royal child ... so he wanted the Magi to tell him precisely where the child was ... not so he could "worship" the child, but so he could destroy the child.

In the few verses after our reading ends, Herod gets so angry about the Magi not returning to him, that he takes matters into his own hands in the most horrifying way possible: he orders his soldiers to go to Bethlehem and kill all of the baby boys under 2-years-old. "If I can't find the one I want, I'll just get rid of all of them," Herod thought.

"Fear leads to anger... anger leads to hate... hate leads to suffering."

By the time King Herod sent his henchmen to carry out his evil plot on the baby boys of Bethlehem, Mary and Joseph had taken Jesus to safety in Egypt. Like the wise men who were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, Joseph had been told in a dream to flee with Mary and Jesus to Egypt.

But, despite our supreme concern for the baby Jesus, his safety doesn't make it any easier to comprehend the violence Herod commits, simply because he is so desperate to hang onto his power.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus' story is a story of dreams and stars, a story of divine prophecy and guidance. It's also a story of evil, paranoid, power-hungry leaders. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus' story is a story about the coming of the Prince of Peace into a violent, hate-filled world.

Then, when Jesus is grown, his story becomes a story of supreme commitment – gathering disciples and challenging them to new ways of being in the world... inviting them to lives marked not by fear, but by love: lives marked by generosity and compassion.

“Fear leads to anger... anger leads to hate... hate leads to suffering.”

This story from Matthew chapter 2 invites us to consider whether our lives will be marked by the fear that filled King Herod's heart... or if our lives will take another road, the road of the Magi, a road marked by worship and generosity.

We read the story of the Magi and King Herod on or around our annual celebration of the holiday we Christians call “Epiphany.”

The actual date of Epiphany is January 6th – and, incidentally, as Pastor Mark mentioned last Sunday in worship, the 12 days of Christmas are the days between Christmas Day and Epiphany...the days between December 25th and January 6th.

That said, many churches – ours included – choose to honor Epiphany on a weekend close to January 6th, either ahead of or following it.

The word “Epiphany” comes from a Greek word meaning “appearance” or “revelation” – it signifies the appearance, or revealing, of God in Jesus Christ to the Magi. This appearance is significant because, in this story, Jesus appeared to outsiders – to non-Jews – for the first time.

With this in mind, the story of Epiphany bears with it the message that God's grace is available to *all* the world – not just to those who were like Jesus. And we celebrate this story around this time every year...perhaps appropriately near the beginning of a new calendar year.

See, the Epiphany story extends to us a critical challenge – a challenge we are invited to consider this New Year's weekend.

The *challenge* of this reading from Matthew chapter 2 is the challenge of choosing to live by fear like King Herod... or choosing “another road” like the Magi – choosing a life marked by worship and generosity.

With the turning of the calendar year, we often become reflective, considering resolutions for the New Year. With the turning of the calendar year, many of us are considering how 2017 will be *positively different* than 2016.

What if, in this New Year, we each honored the spirit of the Magi and went another way from fear?

“Fear leads to anger... anger leads to hate... hate leads to suffering.”

The good news of the Christian message is that, with Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, we have nothing, ultimately, to fear – in life or in death.

What if, in 2017, we lived as though we truly believe this good news that we have *nothing*, ultimately, to fear? Perhaps then we would find ourselves truly free to follow the “other road” of the Magi without fear. Perhaps *then* we would find ourselves truly free to live a life marked by worship and generosity; a life of giving our hearts, our gifts, and our very lives to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ – whose birth we've celebrated and whose star we still follow.

Let us pray...

Holy God, thank you for this Epiphany story. Thank you for the witness of the Magi. Thank you for their worship of your Son. Thank you for the gifts they gave him. As we now turn our hearts toward the celebration of Holy Communion, may we be fully open in this New Year to devoting ourselves to you. And, when we find ourselves fearful, may your Holy Spirit whisper to us, reminding us of your constant, loving presence. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.