

Matthew 2:1-12, 16-18

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi from the east came to Jerusalem, 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." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him, and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet:

'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.'

Then Herod secretly called for the magi and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 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." 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. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 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. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Happy New Year, friends!! We made it to 2026 and Epiphany Sunday - a part of the church season that wraps up Advent and the Christmas season, and pivots up to the "ordinary time" between Christmas and Lent.

Epiphany Sunday traditionally focuses on the wise men of the Christmas story, so I wanted to start with a bit of a reminder of who these mysterious travelers were, these "magi" from the east.

The Bible gives us surprisingly few details, but tradition has done its best to add in more. Instead of a general group of magi, tradition has implied that there were three kings (based on the fact that they brought three gifts), riding camels (perhaps because they came from the east?), bearing expensive gifts. There is little doubt that three men of means would be traveling with a caravan of supplies and resources, but we've settled on naming the three kings or three wise men. But strip away the familiar Christmas pageant imagery, and we are left with

something more compelling. These characters, regardless of how many there are, were educated and powerful individuals, committed to learning more. The text says they studied the sky, so they were astronomers or astrologers, and scholars who were either kings themselves, or advised royalty. They were seekers. They were Gentiles - that is, they were not part of the Jewish lineage, but outsiders who studied the stars and ancient texts, and somehow, their long journey was prompted by the celestial sign of a new King being born in Judea of all places. They left positions of nobility to seek out a baby born of humble means.

Their arrival in Jerusalem, far from home, wasn't just a geographical journey; it was a journey of curiosity, driven by a deep desire to uncover truth wherever it might be found. They represent the first of many seeking non-Jewish people - outsiders we might call them - who would recognize Jesus as something more significant than an ordinary baby born in Bethlehem. Their inclusion in the story reminds us that God's good news is not limited by borders, religion, or background, but is intended for the whole world.

I hope you've heard a sermon or two focusing on how these magi are an early sign that Christ's kingdom is multicultural and expansive, that it signals a move beyond ethnic purity to something far more vast and inclusive.

But today I want to move beyond that aspect of the story to also notice the political posture of the wise men. As powerful and wealthy educated individuals, their first stop when seeking this new born king is to go to the places of power to inquire. But when they are commanded by King Herod to return and report what they have found, they decide based on a dream or vision, to disobey his royal orders and return by another way.

Perhaps the wisest thing about these people is their decision not to let fear of legal consequences dictate their actions. They move about the world to discover what is true, and when they find that it conflicts with the powers of the day, they decide that truth is more important than legalism.

For those of us who are rule followers, it should make us pause to wonder that our Christmas story includes this counter-cultural rejection of political rule structures and power. It certainly made me consider my own life this week.

I'm generally a rule follower. We make sure that we pay our taxes and have an account who makes sure that we are compliant. We stay up to date on our various bills and payments. Our vehicles are registered with PennDot, my bikes are registered using Centre Regions guidelines. Our family is vaccinated and properly registered in Borough, the kids are enrolled and connected to the proper schools. While we do have backyard chickens, we got rid of our poor roosters in order to comply with Borough ordinances. We shovel snow in the winter and keep our sidewalks clear. I'm embarrassed rather than proud when I get a speeding ticket, and we generally cut our grass in the spring *before* the Borough tells us it's getting too unruly.

But I also like to live my life with the hope that if presented with a situation where I had to choose living out deeper values that might conflict with the rules and laws of our community, I would do so.

As a child this was instilled in me with biblical stories like Daniel and his friends who refused to bow down to idols, and were punished with furnaces and lions and miraculously saved by God for their outward displays of faith. Those moments made me imagine that the most important thing I could ever do was profess my faith in the face of persecution.

But decades later, I wonder if it is even more important to stand up for the values of my faith, not just the faith identity. If I were required by law to go to war, I would hope I would refuse. If I were required to turn in my undocumented neighbors, I believe I would say no. If I were required to uphold racist or sexist language, to invest in oppressive or abusive structures, or to affirm an oppressive ruler or dictator, I believe I have the courage to outright reject these things regardless of the consequences.

It's funny - my Sunday school teachers, and the outward evangelical voices that are most prominent today seem far more concerned with Christians being silenced or discouraged from sharing their faith. There is an apparent ongoing war against Christmas, and a loud political voice saying Christian faith is under attack by the liberal left. But after 43 years of living, including more than 20 in this country, I've rarely felt like my faith was threatened. I've never feared sharing that I was employed by a church, and Christmas music and decorations continue to

bombard me even when I'm grocery shopping. In fact, on the days where I'm most grumpy about the state of Christianity, I might argue that our biggest threat is not toward Christianity but to the way Christianity has been corrupted from within by militarism, sexism, racism, and capitalism.

But setting that aside for now, what about the core tenets of our faith that may not line up with the laws of our land? I know that there are folks who are courageously trying to do just that - things like refusing to pay a portion of their federal taxes, proportional to our bloated national military budget. I think about those who block traffic or disrupt other daily happenings to protest injustice. I think about those who have broken into federal spaces to hold a candle to ongoing systemic oppression of our environment and the people whose lives are impacted. And I think about people who intentionally move to live alongside those who are carrying the burden of poverty, racism, or abuse. (SLIDE)

This is Linda and Jack Knox, Mennonites who live in the border town of Douglas, Arizona, situated just north of the Mexican town of Agua Prieta. Jack was the pastor of Salem Mennonite Church in Oregon for many years, and upon retirement, decided that he and his wife Linda would move down to the Mexican border to be a peaceful presence in a difficult community. The cost of living in Oregon was significantly higher than this bordertown, and so after a few years the couple purchased a second home to extend the reach of their hospitality. They also decided that while their official residence would be in the USA, they would also travel south - sometimes many times a week, to serve in the migrant shelters and other nonprofits situated in Agua Prieta. (SLIDE) Their presence in the community also includes placing water in the desert for those seeking relief from the oppressive heat, and participating in protests and ceremonies to mark the hundreds of thousands of lives that have been lost in the region while in search of a better life.

Most of the time Jack and Linda use their homes to host volunteers who come to the region to connect with Frontera de Cristo, a multidenominational agency that leads borderland tours. But over the years they have also opened their home to folks in need - whether because of job insecurity, immigration status, or even those who are making the deadly and illegal journey crossing from Mexico into this country in search of a better life. (SLIDE) When I met them a few years ago while leading a group of Penn State students, we learned that they aren't terribly

concerned with the legality of the people they host. They see hospitality as essential to their faith calling, and they know that they would continue to offer it even under threat from ICE, or other government structures.

While we only had a few hours of conversation around a meal, it was inspiring to see how they were choosing to live out their faith like those wise men - seeking truth and actively living out their faith, despite what pressure might be applied by any powers or governments.

In our Advent materials, one of the writers reminds us that “the magi don’t let Herod’s fear-driven demands stop them from honoring the newborn Christ or returning home by a different way. They model for us what it looks like to be led by hope, moving through fear without letting it paralyze us.” (SLIDE)

I wonder if that is a healthy posture to start a new year. As a new year begins, we lead by faith. We step forward with the hope that fear will not have the last word.

Yes, the Magi's journey highlights the universal scope of Christ's kingdom, reaching beyond borders and backgrounds. But crucially, their decision to disobey King Herod's command and return home "by another road," driven by a dream, demonstrates a counter-cultural rejection of oppressive political power because they knew what was more deeply true. The message reminds us to prioritize deeper values over strict adherence to rules when the two conflict - truth and honor over the fear of legal consequence.

Friends, perhaps we move from this place asking what it means to stand up for faith values today. Perhaps we can continue to be an example in our world of a shifting focus from simply professing faith to actively living out its underlying values, even when it means civil disobedience.