

Prayer: Bright Morning Star, your light has come, and the birth of Jesus has overwhelmed us with joy. Teach us to see the signs of your light and love as we read and hear Scripture today. And like the magi of long ago, may we be drawn to you and offer you such gifts as we are able. Amen.

Happy 12th day of Christmas! Happy Epiphany.

Today we read of the wise men following the star to pay homage to the newborn Messiah. And while the shepherds, angels, and wise men appear together at the manger in most of our images of it, the wise men come much later. News of Jesus' birth travels to the far east. The wise men were the most educated of their time and adept at reading the stars. They travel to meet him. They are the Gentiles, the non-Jewish, ones who come to pay homage and recognize his significance even before Jesus' own people do.

**Scripture: Matthew 2:1-12**

2:1 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem,

2:2 asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage."

2:3 When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him;

2:4 and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.

2:5 They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

2:6 '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.'"

2:7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared.

2:8 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."

2:9 When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was.

2:10 When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.

2:11 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.

2:12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

## **The Escape to Egypt**

<sup>13</sup> Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." <sup>14</sup> Then Joseph<sup>[i]</sup> got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, <sup>15</sup> and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son."

## **The Massacre of the Infants**

<sup>16</sup> When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men,<sup>[i]</sup> 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 wise men.<sup>[i]</sup> <sup>17</sup> Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

<sup>18</sup> "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."

## **Meditation**

In some recent years we have had star words ready to pass out in worship on this Epiphany Sunday. The words are a random list, thrown into a basket, and picked out.

You are invited to ponder like Mary and consider this word as your word for the coming year, asking God to reveal to you something of its meaning.

The word you pick might be "encouragement, patience, mystery, joy, or success."

I asked Chuck what his word was last year, and he replied, "Extremely handsome."

While I love the simple practice of holding a word and seeing what might be revealed, the word is not magic, but a way to enter into a conversation with God.

We make a personal connection to God's epiphany.

The downside of star words is we may forget the all-encompassing, earth shattering, work of God who loves the world and comes to reveal his ways to all people.

This passage of Scripture today will not allow us to just consider God's personal revelation. Jesus was born to reveal God's ways to the whole world.

We love the warm, tender nativity scene.

And sometimes forget the treachery that Jesus' birth unleashed.

In fear, Herod goes on a violent rampage.

The news of Christ's birth is as the angel puts it, "good news for all people."  
John tells us that Jesus is the light of the world.  
God reveals that, "in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.  
The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

Different people react in various ways to the revelation.  
While the light drew the poor shepherds and wise men to worship,  
it drew out Herod's fear.  
Mary ponders these things in her heart.  
Baby John leaps for joy in his mother's womb.  
Elizabeth blesses.  
Zechariah sings.  
Joseph protects.  
But not Herod. Herod is afraid.

Jesus will cause some to drop their nets and follow,  
others to sell all they have and give it away,  
some will put down the stones they are about to throw, forgive seventy times seven,  
and others will learn to turn the other cheek.  
Many will come to Jesus and seek first the Kingdom of God.  
Oh, these are not the ways of Herod, and Herod is very afraid.  
Herod promotes fear in exchange for loyalty to himself and the empire.

Others in power will plot to destroy Jesus, entrap him, and crucify him,  
for they, like Herod, are very afraid of him.

Herod tries to use the wise men as his intelligence agents, but being spiritually in tune,  
God reveals to the wise men in a dream to go home by another way.  
And in another dream, Joseph is told to escape Herod's treachery.

In all his fear and desire to keep power,  
Herod massacres all the children under two near Bethlehem, just a Pharaoh did.  
And in our world today, it is usually the innocents that pay the price.  
They become the scapegoats for our fears and need to hold onto power.  
Can you think of any current events in our world today which mirror that?

So what is so threatening about a little Jewish boy, born in a manger?  
It was the light.

The light would draw people to God.  
And Herod's ways would be undermined.  
Jesus is the King, the Messiah-Christ that God sends.  
He is the kind of King about whom the Psalmist sings in the Psalm for today,

**Psalm 72:10-14**

72:10 May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles render him tribute, may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts.

72:11 May all kings fall down before him, all nations give him service.

72:12 For he delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper.

72:13 He has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy.

72:14 From oppression and violence he redeems their life; and precious is their blood in his sight.

The word of the Lord...

Earthly leaders are still held to this kind of standard by God.  
God almighty does not just care for the personal, but the public well-being of his people.  
But Herod will not bow- to God or anyone else.  
Instead, he will try to control the situation.  
And Joseph and his family will flee.

The good news of God's salvation, Jesus, the light of the world, is born in a backwater town, not in a palace.

And Jesus' birth is that sign that God's will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Herod knows this too well, and is afraid.

In light of the brokenness in our lives and in our world, God sends his Son.

No one of us is beyond God's saving or God's grace.

Jill Duffield writes so beautifully,

*God's expansive purview excludes no corner of creation, no far flung town or powerful palace, no shepherd or earthly king. Those currently enjoying the status quo ought to be frightened. Be afraid, Herod. Be very afraid. Herod's epiphany that this child, this King of the Jews, trumps any political, military or temporal power is correct. Nations, Gentiles, wise ones from the East, poor ones from the fields, tax collectors once willing to capitulate to Rome, hungry crowds and even women and children will be united in Christ, enlisted to serve God fully and sent to proclaim to all with ears to hear that their worth is God-given, their dignity God-ordained, their loyalty to the Lord alone. Be afraid, Herod. Be very, afraid.<sup>i</sup>*

The light that drew the wise men, still draws us to Christ. I think most of us want the world to be kind, fair, loving, and just. Think for just a moment about who in your life exudes the Light of Christ...

As I wrote this reflection on Wednesday, I saw a procession of Fort Hill disciples delivering over 2000 pounds of food to Clemson Community Care.

So naturally I thought of you.

You, Fort Hill Church, bring the light of Christ to our neighborhood.

We are planted here to serve the greater Clemson community. It's the Fort Hill way.

This past week our family watched the new documentary on Fred Rogers.

The movie *Won't You be my Neighbor?* took me back to middle school, where frankly, we made fun of Mister Rogers. Usually those jokes were just a cover.

The truth is we really liked him!

Fred Rogers was an ordained Presbyterian minister, and his call was "Evangelist."

His work on behalf of children did so much good to teach the Christian values we treasure to a broader audience.

He was a light that drew us to goodness and love by teaching us to care for our neighbors and to love ourselves

all within the context of the community, the neighborhood.

Occasionally Mr. Rogers addressed issues in our world with children, like in the 1980s during the war in Lebanon, and again when black and white people were attacked for sharing a swimming pool during segregation.

Mr. Rogers adroitly invited the black police officer Mr. Clemmons to sit beside him and cool his feet in the same baby pool

When the world went reeling after the 911 attacks on the Twin Towers and Pentagon, Mr. Rogers was shaken and felt he needed to respond.

Doing what he always did, he wanted to bring healing to children in our world.

After playing his song on the piano, he turned to millions of viewers and said,

"No matter what our part or job, especially in our world today, we are all called to be 'tikkun olam' or 'repairers of Creation.'"

Thank you for whatever you do, wherever you are, to bring joy and light, hope and faith, pardon and love to your neighbor and yourself."<sup>ii</sup>

In this new year my prayer is that we place our trust in Jesus rather than the Herods, or the stock market, or any other power.

The message of the angel to us is “Do not be afraid; for see- I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people...” (Luke 2:10)

While today we celebrate the good news of Jesus revealing the Kingdom of God to all people- including all Gentiles like the wise men, it is also very personal.

God's love for you, child of God, is unconditional and unwavering.

It is the kind of love God has for all his children.

So the one star word we all need to cling to this year is Jesus.

For unto us a child is born, a Son is given.

He is Light of the World and "in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." (John 1:4-5)

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<sup>i</sup> Duffield, Jill. “Looking into the Lectionary” *Presbyterian Outlook*, December 31, 2018.

<sup>ii</sup> *Won't you be My Neighbor?* Morgan Neville, USA, Tremolo, 2018.