

Matthew 2:1–12; 16–18 *Fear Doesn't Stop Us*

Good morning, and welcome to “Epiphany Sunday.” Epiphany isn’t until Tuesday, but this is the closest Sunday, so here we are. The word **epiphany** is often used to describe that moment when we finally recognize what was there all along—or when we realize that something we thought was true really isn’t. Most definitions describe an epiphany as a manifestation or moment of revelation, often attributed to a divine source. It’s similar to the word *eureka*—which also means a moment of discovery. The most famous *eureka* moment is attributed to the ancient Greek mathematician Archimedes. If you’ve taken a physics class, he’s the guy who said, “Give me a lever and I shall move the world.” But he also discovered the principle of buoyancy while sitting in a bathtub. He noticed the water level rise as he submerged himself in the tub. Legend says that when he realized what that meant, he jumped out of the tub and ran naked through the streets shouting, “Eureka!”—which in Greek means, “I found it!” I understand the joy of discovery, honestly I do, but is it worth going to jail for indecent exposure?

This week’s scripture is about revelation and discovery. We need to back up briefly from last week, when we focused on Joseph and Mary’s flight to Egypt to protect their child. This week is Epiphany, which means we turn our attention to the Magi from the East. The word *magi* is most often translated “wise men” in the Bible, but it refers more specifically to a priestly class of mages from Persia, roughly modern-day Iran. They were religious figures outside Judaism—what we might call pagans—who were deeply suspicious of the Roman Empire. Why? Because Rome didn’t just conquer territories; it imposed its culture and values on the people who were living there. “When in Rome, do as the Romans do” was less a suggestion and more a threat. You might say the phrase always came with an unspoken “or else.”

Many scholars believe that in Matthew's birth narrative, the Magi represent the "old ways." Persian priests practiced Zoroastrianism, a tradition that used astronomy and astrology for guidance. The Rev. Dr. Boyung Lee writes that the Magi "carried within themselves a spirit of resistance to the Hellenization of their land." *Hellenization* refers to the spread of Greek and Roman culture—something the Persians largely rejected.

They did not see Herod as a legitimate king. They saw him as a Roman puppet dressed up like a Judean ruler who was more loyal to Rome than to Judaism. Dr. Lee suggests that the Magi may have been intrigued by the idea of an indigenous king reclaiming the Judean throne. So when they heard prophecies about a child from the house of David who would be called "King of the Jews," they traveled to Judea to see for themselves. As Dr. Lee puts it, "Perhaps in the sign of an indigenous king to be restored to the Judean throne, they recognized a hope not unlike their own for a restored Persian ruler."

Our theme for Advent and Christmas this year has been "hope is greater than fear." So think about how courageous these Magi were to knock on Herod's door. "Hi. We're from out of town. We heard there's a child recently born around here who's going to be the legitimate king of Judea. We're here to pay *him* homage. Not you, 'King' Herod. The child." Whew! The audacity of these guys! What a flex on their part! Here's what I appreciate about this passage. For weeks we've talked about the fear Herod caused Joseph and Mary. Now the tables are turned. Matthew writes: "When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him" meaning the religious elites who had something to lose if Herod wasn't on the throne. What usually happens when a bully gets scared? He goes into self-protection mode. So Herod summons the Magi back to his palace and says, "Go find the child, and when you do, come back and tell me—so that I too may go and pay him homage. No really. I want to give the little guy a present too." Sure, Herod. Totally believable.

The Magi see right through his deceit. They find the child, offer gifts of extraordinary value, and then return home by another route, refusing to report back to Herod. They know what he will do if he finds Jesus. And what does Herod do when he's thwarted? He orders the death of every child in Bethlehem under the age of two. Violence is always the last refuge of threatened power.

That's when Joseph and Mary escape to Egypt which is what we focused on last week. Dr. Lee raises an intriguing possibility here – Those gifts of the Magi gave the Holy Family? What if those gifts funded their escape? Again, that's pure speculation, but wow – wouldn't that be something? So here we are, at the end of Advent and Christmas. And yet, two thousand years later, the world still brims with violence, uncertainty, and fear. The birth of Christ did not silence the Herods of the world. Empires still rage. The innocent still suffer. The question is not *whether* fear exists. The question is what we do with it. Do we freeze? Do we flee? Or do we move forward, as the Magi did—refusing to let fear have the final word?

The church has a tendency to domesticate this story. We mash Matthew and Luke's birth stories together, throw shepherds and Magi into the same nativity set, and we call it Christmas. And I'm guilty of this too! I do this every year. I set out my Willow Tree nativity set—sheep, donkeys, shepherds, and of course the year Willow Tree had a shepherd boy with a goat, I made sure to get that. And of course there are three Magi, a few angels, Joseph, Mary, and baby Jesus. When the kids were little, Thor, Hulk, and Captain America often wandered out of their toy boxes and paid homage to the Christ child too. But let's be honest—Matthew 2 is not a cozy fairytale. From the opening line, we are reminded that this story happens “in the time of King Herod,” a ruler known for his paranoia and brutality. Herod represents the worst kind of power— power that responds to threat not with humility, but with violence. The massacre of innocents hearkens back to Pharaoh's fear of the child Moses generations earlier in the Exodus story.

Into this volatile landscape come the Magi—foreigners, Gentiles, astrologers, marginal figures—yet they are the *first* to recognize the Christ child. Nothing about this story is typical. It disrupts imperial, racial, and theological expectations. This is what Epiphany reveals: God’s movement does not stay in safe places or among approved people.

Matthew’s Gospel consistently places God’s activity on the margins. Jesus is not born in Jerusalem, but in Bethlehem. He is not recognized by religious elites, but by pagan astrologers. He is not protected by armies, but by the dreams of a refugee father who listens to angels. This is about an upside-down kingdom, one that refuses imperial logic. Herod trembles. Jerusalem trembles. But the Magi *do not* turn back. They seek. They kneel. They listen. They move forward. Epiphanies are not always warm or gentle. Sometimes they are disruptive. Sometimes they are dangerous. Sometimes they send us home by another way. And they always ask us the same question: Will we move the way *fear* tells us to move—or by the way *love* calls us to move?

In the face of fear, let us travel together. Let us kneel not before power, but before the Christ child. Let us believe—with trembling hope—that fear does not have the last word. Because fear doesn’t stop us. Love leads us forward.