

Rev. Janet R. Doyle  
Elmer Presbyterian Church  
Second Sunday of Christmas  
Sunday, January 5, 2025  
Scripture: Matthew 2: 1- 21  
Sermon: The Journey

Have you begun to dismantle Christmas yet? Have you taken down the tree? Removed lights or other decorations? Made your returns to the stores? Put away the crèche? In most homes now it has become customary after New Year's Day to un-deck the halls. You begin to see dried Christmas trees line the streets come January 1. Twinkling lights on the houses are shut off. Christmas carols are no longer played in the stores and the world looks not as magical as it did leading up to Christmas.

The Christmas season officially lasts twelve days. The 12 days of Christmas is the period in Christian theology that marks the span between the birth of Christ and the coming of the Magi, the three wise men. It begins on December 25 (Christmas) and runs through January 6, Epiphany, sometimes also called Three Kings' Day. The four weeks preceding Christmas are collectively known as Advent, which begins four Sundays before Christmas and ends on December 24.

Today we celebrate Epiphany. The word epiphany means "manifestation" or "moment of sudden insight," to learn something, to see something for the first time and be utterly changed. We celebrate the day these mysterious visitors, the magi, greet the newborn babe and are forever changed.

We know very little about the magi. They never make an appearance again in the Christian story. The church has built up a tradition about these persons. Some call the magi magicians or astronomers, scholars or exotic kings. Some say they traveled from Africa, or Asia. Others say they came from Europe. They have made their way into our Christmas pageants and nativities.

Their story is bold and wondrous enough to grant them their own festival, or special day in the life of the church. We love the story of the kings. And no amount of scholarship or new insights will change our nativity pageants, our Christmas decorations, or our hymns. There is a wonder and

a mystery about this story of wandering magi led to Jesus from the East by a rising star.

We love this story in part because of the mystery these three distant and somewhat exotic guests are introduced into the story. There is also another element to this story that often gets forgotten in our pageants and scripture reading of the visit of the magi. The fear of that time and place.

King Herod, after all, does not greet the news of a newborn king with joy and gladness, nor does he search for a gift fit to present the messiah. Rather, he is afraid. The Gospel reads: "Wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 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.' When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him" (Matthew 2:1–3).

King Herod rose to power through military conquest with the backing of Rome and the occupying government. His reign saw many cultural and architectural achievements. One thing that's true about our world is the desire for power. The one thing the powerful seek more than anything else is to remain in power.

Herod is immediately threatened by the mere mention of another and therefore rival king. Matthew's Gospel goes on to include the difficult part that we read this morning in our history of Jesus' birth.

*Now after the Magi had gone, 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.' Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and fled to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent for and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under. (Matthew 2:13–16).*

This story is sometimes referred to as the Massacre of the Holy Innocents. Fear is a powerful, haunting thing. In response to his fear, Herod conspires to find the baby Messiah and kill him. In his fear, Herod kills an entire generation in and around Bethlehem. The threat of this newborn king, this baby, was so great that fear overcame him, and acting in that fear, he did the unimaginable.

Fear is a powerful, haunting thing. Human behavior research has told us that the oppressed, those with their backs against the walls, respond to fear by adopting behavior, ways of life that may protect them. They begin to take caution, and fear becomes a form of life assurance. Fear becomes a way of life. Fear drives every action of the day, every thought of the night. It is a limited, crushing reality.

For the privileged and powerful, those who run the world, call the shots, those who rely on the existence of the oppressed, they respond to fear with even more power, sometimes force. Fear grabs hold to the powerful; a false reality is created, and, using their resources of plenty, they protect themselves at any cost.

Think about it. The world's hatred and bigotry and powerful dictators is rooted in fear. If anything, the past years have shown us this point. What is fear doing to us?

Do we install more security systems in our homes and cars? Do we build more gates, a wall, or buy more guns? Do we sit closer to the exit at the cinema or concert hall or church? Do we think twice when boarding an airplane or train with persons who speak a different language? Do we fear certain social or institutional change because it will disrupt our own knowledge, privilege, comfort?

Matthew's nativity moves quickly from the glad moment of the adoration and gifts of the magi to a darker world of political deception and fear-induced violence. But if Matthew's account is more sober, it is also realistic. We live in a world riddled by fear, a world of devastating hurricanes and elementary school massacres, a world where innocent children die of preventable illness, hunger, and live in war torn countries and violent cities.

In Matthew's story of the visit of the magi and in the massacre of the innocents in the verses that follow, the Gospel renders an accurate, if also difficult, picture of the world. That is what is at the heart of Matthew's story of Jesus' birth: the promise of God coming to a people so controlled by fear that we often do the unthinkable to each other and ourselves.

On this journey of life we are living we need a Savior and we need a relationship with our Creator who loves us so much that he came into the violent world to give us his peace that the world cannot give us.

Jesus is Emmanuel, the reminder that God is with us, the living, breathing, and vulnerable promise that God chose to live among us, despite it all. A companion on our journey to help us face fear head on, to meet fear with the promise and love of God.

That's what the magi experienced as they journey to find Jesus. The magi saw the promises of God being fulfilled right before their eyes.

The promise of a new kingdom, a new world being born. A world in which the last become first and the oppressed are set free. A world in which food and warmth are found in plenty and wars and strife cease. Love coming down, Light coming down, God coming down and fear takes a backseat to faith and trusting in God as we journey.

Once the magi experienced that epiphany of discovering Jesus they caught a glimpse of this new thing happening on their journey. Jesus' birth, this promise of God being brought into this world, they knew the journey home would be a different one. The magi leave forever different. Altered-changed and so do we.

When you meet Jesus your journey is not business as usual. Life has changed. Every day we, too, are invited to go by another road.

Because of seeing Jesus this Christmas Season we are changed. This new year of 2025 we are on this journey together as a church family and we want to invite others to join us on this journey of faith. When we journey with Jesus we are led to new places where the possibilities of God soar and the journey can lead us into trying places, places of newness, of discomfort, of challenge, of joy and of sadness.

Once we catch a glimpse of this promise, this hope, the road home is never the same. The love and promise of God never leaves us as we once were. When we see it, when we realize it, the road is new, the pathway different.

With the promises and love of God to guide us, to protect us, we have little to fear on this journey.

As you come to the Lord's Table today come prepared to journey with Jesus. You will never be the same. Come and sit with your Savior for he came to give us life.