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Matthew 2:1-18
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Out of the Darkness

Is it me or does the Christmas Season in the Church always seems to go so long? While the rest of our culture has put this holiday to bed for another year, wrapped up their decorations, purged the old ones, and tucked them away in the attic, here we are still in full Christmas mode. Why?

Well today is the Ehipany, the day the Church traditionally celebrates the arrival of the magi, Babylonian astronomers, who had been tracking the Hebrew scriptures and the movement of the stars to indicate the exact time and location of the Messiah's birth.

While tradition often implies that these pagan stargazers came at the time of Jesus' birth, the scripture tells us that some time had passed. Jesus was really a young child, about two years old, living in a house in Bethlehem with his mother and father, when they finally showed up.

Now that is a long Christmas season!

Throughout Advent, we've been focusing on the words of the Prophet Isaiah. "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light, on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned." And we've seen how Jesus, the light of the world, is that light who shines through all of our darkness. The Light who is our Wonderful Counselor, our Mighty God, our Everlasting Father, and our Prince of Peace.

On Christmas Eve, we proclaimed that because of Jesus we can know beyond a shadow of a doubt that all will be well in our world with Jesus by our side. Though our lives might be full of mess and chaos and strife...with Jesus we can breathe a sigh of relief.

Today we see that the mess continues. You see, Jesus' coming into our world doesn't necessarily mean that our lives will be mess free, trouble free, or stress free. In fact with Jesus, it's often quite the opposite.

Jesus doesn't make it easy for anyone. In fact we will see today that Jesus creates insecurity and strife for political leaders who think that abusive power, violence, and threats are the way govern a people of peace.

He brings inconvenience and challenge for those who are earnestly seeking a savior.

And struggle and fear for parents who are trying their best to raise a family and do what is right in the eyes of God.

Our scripture story today takes us back to Bethlehem in Judea after Jesus was born. A small village about 5 miles south of Jerusalem. It is the reign of King Herod who was a Jew appointed by Rome to be the King of the Jews...though he was never accepted by the Jewish people as such. His reign was marked by extreme ambition, paranoia, and cruelty.

Please join me as we read the story from Matthew 2:1-18 and we see how nothing about Jesus' story is clean or easy.

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

It isn't easy preaching the same texts year after year and coming up with something fresh and insightful to say. I've preached on this at Cascades for fourteen seasons straight. And yet the irony is that no matter how hard I try to spin it, the more I dive into these living words, the more it begins to spin me and how all the more relevant it is for today.

There are three areas that I want to address with this text today. The state of our government. The state of our Church. And the state of our families.

First and foremost, and I think it comes at no surprise to any of us...but our government is a mess. I don't care if we are republican, democratic, or independent. We have allowed political infighting to wage battles where someone wins and someone loses. Where is the good will for one another? Where is the free flowing exchange of ideas that fuels our democracy? Where is the sense that we are better together than we are apart?

Gone. Because we are all being so selfish that we fail to consider that maybe someone different than us might have a better idea on how to solve all of the issues at hand. The truth is that Washington breeds a culture of extreme ambition, paranoia, and cruelty.

Sound familiar? Herod and his government struggled with exactly the same culture.

Imagine immigrants traveling through Central America, breaching the US Mexican border, and then showing up at the White House to ask where they might find the next President of the United States of America.

Our scripture says that when these foreigners crossed over the border into Israel, showed up in Jerusalem, had asked "Where they might find the one born King of the Jews so they could worship him" that Herod was disturbed. So disturbed that it sent all of Jerusalem in a tizzy as well.

Herod was so paranoid about maintaining his political power base that he murdered his wife and three sons because he feared that they would overthrow him.

When we are more focused on building walls than bridges, we eventually build walls around ourselves and cut ourselves off from everyone else. We isolate

ourselves from the outside world. And everything becomes an us against them battle. Does it seem like that today?

But we heard a different story during Advent. That Jesus, this baby of whom Herod is so afraid, our Prince of Peace, is all about building bridges...not walls. He is about tearing down walls of hostility that separate us from one another, from God, from ourselves, and from creation.¹ Jesus is about uniting us with our enemies, forming one family under God with liberty and justice for all.

But when our leaders think that abusive power, violence, and threats are the way govern a people of peace, the mere presence of Jesus is enough to send them into a tail spin.

What if we began to listen to one another? Really listen? What might be the real issues at stake? What are our common hopes and dreams? What are our honest fears? What if we did this with genuine good will for our fellow neighbor even though they might look, think, or believe differently than we do?

I'll tell you what would happen. Relationships would form between us and our "enemy" that would be indestructable.

In last January's edition of *Presbyterian Today*, there was a story of a church who responded to when public threats were made toward muslims in their community. This church reached out to the muslim neighbors and invited them in for meals, even hosted "Ask a Muslim Anything" forums. What happened is that God showed up in their midst as they broke bread with one another during Ramadan. They gained a mutual love and respect, an understanding for one another. One Muslim woman said, "This church reached out to us and made us feel safe when we felt the most vulnerable. That's a true Christian value."²

Who might we at Cascades reach out to in this way? What if we begun promoting a different story than one of abusive power, paranoia, and cruelty? Life with Jesus will be messy, but it will also be good!

This leads me to think about next area that I want to address which is the state of our church. In a few weeks our elders will be publishing the Annual Report for 2018. This is a snapshot of the year in review. We will see what God has done in and through us. But we will also look critically on areas that we have yet to address. These are opportunities for growth.

One of the areas I think we could do better in as a church is passionately pursuing people outside our doors who have yet to come to know the love and peace of Jesus Christ. I think we would all agree that sharing our personal faith with others is a core tenant of our belief. And yet we don't. We keep this great gift

¹ Ephesians 2:14

² Paul Seebeck, "Christian Values. Muslim and Christians Share a Meal - and More." *Presbyterian Today*, vol. December 2017/January 2018, pp. 28-31.

to ourselves and struggle to know what to say, how to say it, or when to even say it. So the greatest kept secret stays a secret.

The Magi traveling from afar represented such outsiders to the Jewish faith. Regardless of what we believe, we are all on a journey headed somewhere, my friends. Studies show that more than ever people consider themselves spiritual, just not religious. In other words, we are all seeking what is true in the world and what is true for our lives. We are all searching for meaning, and purpose, and belonging.

When the Magi showed up to Jerusalem, the Jewish religious folk were threatened by these outsiders looking for “their” Messiah. We don’t get any sense of true welcome or hospitality shown to these weary travelers. It was more “What can we get from them to serve our purposes and then send them on their way as quickly as we can.” They certainly didn’t invite them to worship in the temple where they might encounter God.

So instead, these traveling foreigners found God in an ordinary house, wearing the skin of an ordinary child, someone like you and like me.

One of the things that I love about Christmas Eve is the chance to worship with folks that we see once a year or less. There are always new faces and it brings me so much joy to proclaim the Good News of Jesus’ birth to them.

I was especially glad to see a new face in the choir of someone I hadn’t seen before. Christie Logan’s daughter, a junior at Evergreen High School, with a beautiful voice, had been welcomed to join in the choir for that night. Nancy I want to thank you especially for creating such a place of welcome and hospitality. You model well what I hope we could be doing more as a whole church.

What more could we do to remove the barriers that often separate those inside the church from those outside our walls? What inconveniences or challenges hinder those who are earnestly seeking Jesus from finding them among us today? I don’t have answers. But these are crucial questions to ask.

The Prophet Jeremiah said to those outsiders living in Babylonian exile, “You will seek me, you find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you,” declares the Lord, “and will bring you back from captivity.”³

I believe Jesus wants us to open our doors wider to let more people in to hear the Good News of his coming!

And finally, I want to talk about the state of our families and how Jesus addresses our struggles and fears of raising children today.

Last week, Aleida Jernigan preached on the story of Jesus as a twelve year old child, being left behind in the temple by his parents. We were told that as was custom, Joseph and Mary took their family to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover.

³Jeremiah 29:11

Like many of us, they were God fearing parents who were trying to raise their child with every opportunity to know God and to live according to God's ways.

But ultimately they could only take him so far. They could only lay a foundation for his faith...but where he went on the cusp of adulthood...would be a matter between Jesus and his Heavenly Father. It was completely out of their parental control.

I'm thinking a lot about that these days as we have launched two of our four children into adulthood. The world is not an easy place to be launched these days. Information choices are endless. Competition for time and attention is stiff. Life is far more expensive than most starting salaries can afford. Social media fosters shallow relationships at best.

And according to a recent article in the Washington Post, our young adults 18 to 22 are the loneliest generation yet.⁴ To make matters worse, many aren't looking for those deep connections with God or others through the Church even though they've been bathed in it all their lives.

Many of us know that raising children to be life long followers of Jesus is full of struggle and fear. So much of it is out of our control. We have to trust that God will work in our children's lives long after our ability to directly influence them spiritually has passed.

Jesus challenges us to love them whether or not our children follow in our footsteps. To sacrificially pick up our crosses and follow him, believing that whatever we try to control will be lost, but whatever we let go of for Jesus' sake will be found.

My friends the truth of the Christmas story is this. If we want to wrap our lives up with a nice little bow...so that it presents beautifully on the outside regardless of what junk is inside...then do not invite Jesus to be part of it. He will mess things up. He will lead us into a valley of the shadow of death. He will make things difficult.

Life will be messy. Life will be uncertain. Life will be challenging. The world may even hate us.

But it will be good and we will have a peace that goes beyond understanding knowing that the God of the universe is with us every step of the way.

Jesus said, "I have told you these things, so that you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."⁵

⁴ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/parenting/wp/2018/05/03/why-are-young-adults-the-loneliest-generation-in-america/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.ad14c9ae8078

⁵ John 16:33

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.”⁶

So may the Spirit of God encourage us that though the darkness may still surround us, though Herod might still be out there seeking to destroy us, that because Jesus is here and his light casts away all darkness. May we be bridge builders with those who are different from us. May we entrust the state of our country, our Church, and our families into God’s hands. And may we shine the light of Jesus in the dark world around us.

⁶John 14:27