



CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

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## A WITNESS TO GLORY

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*Lead Minister*

*January 10, 2021, Epiphany Sunday*

**Text: Matthew 2:1-12**

Even as I speak to you this morning, our nation is still reeling from the chaos, violence, and vandalism that racked our Capitol in Washington, D.C. on the day the church observes the Epiphany of the Lord. And as our nation confronts the failures and vulnerabilities of our institutions, the people of God must be ever faithful to witness to the good news of love, life, and liberation in midst of hatred, death, and oppression. Especially during the season of Epiphany, the season in which we set our focus on the appearing and revealing of what is good, right, and just, we must not be shy or silent in our resistance to the worst instincts of politics and nationalism. What occurred in our nation's capital is now an undeniable part of the American story. It happened. I pray, Plymouth, that we renew our commitment to the urgent, prophetic pursuit of a more perfect union for all.

The story of the Magi or Wise Men is an iconic narrative for the Christmas season. I had a three-year run as a Wise Man in Christmas pageants during my middle-school years. But, along with the Gospel stories of the baptism of Jesus, this story is also the principle biblical narrative for observing the season of Epiphany, that time of the year in which the church not only testifies that God made God's self known in Jesus but also takes seriously that idea that God works in and through even the natural world to reveal God's self to us. According to the Gospel of Matthew, which is the only Gospel that recounts the story, these Wise Men came to Jerusalem because they observed a star that apparently revealed to them that the true king of the Jews had been born. They had been captivated by God's glory in a star and were compelled to seek out the revelation.

This story is so colorful and so readily recognizable that its true power and subversion are easily missed. In our eagerness to get to the story, we run right over the Gospel writer's setting of the scene with the opening, "in the time of King Herod." And while the conventions of storytelling require a colorful antagonist like King Herod, the truth is there were many Herods over many years in ancient Palestine, years of these kings tapped by Rome to oversee the people it conquered and the territory it occupied.

There is something about the time of King Herod that begs for a revealing or an appearing of God's presence, holiness, and glory. This is a time when kings-in-charge doing the bidding of the empire ruled with an iron fist, oppressing, dominating, and exploiting some of the most vulnerable people; where dissent and resistance of any kind were met with slaughter, enslavement, or crucifixion; where tribute, taxes, tithes, and offerings were mercilessly extracted to finance massive construction of military fortresses and Roman temples and theaters; when the religious elite and the Temple were controlled and compromised and unable and unwilling to serve God's people. I hope we take note of the age in which these Magi saw the presence of God.

Possessed with what one theologian called "a revelatory state of mind" (James Kugel, *The Great Shift*), open to something external to themselves, something not distorted by a brutal imperial system, these foreign priests, stargazers, Magi recognize the divine presence in a peasant child in a backwater town. And their audacious act of seeing and recognizing the holy in an unexpected place frightens and

destabilizes the empire. To be sure, Herod saw them as nothing more than pawns in his game to secure and maintain his power. Culturally and economically, their interest in the whereabouts of a peasant child confound the expectations of the social conventions of the times. And yet, their very act of seeking out Jesus to honor him as the king of the Jews leads them to stand in opposition to the powers that be. In their claim of God appearing in some place other than the royal palace and the halls of power, they join the people of Israel in their prophetic discontent and resistance to empire. God's revelation anticipates renewal and liberation.

It is because of an epiphany that the age of pretenders to the throne, this time of King Herod, is coming to an end. And these stargazers from a foreign land are the ones to see that the birth of Jesus was God's way of instituting a "program of renewal" of Israel, that there is good news for God's people in an age awash in oppression, domination, and exploitation. That is some sight! There is something gloriously revealing about powerful men aligning themselves with the discontent and resistance of marginalized people over the imperial system and the status quo. Perhaps this is the season that calls for an intentional search for where God's vision of renewal and liberation is being birthed. We need an epiphany.

Epiphany is a challenging concept in any age, but especially in our time. If I had to hazard a moniker to affix to the time in which we live, I have any number of troubling signs and failures and concerns from which to draw to describe it. The age of inequality. The time of autocracy. The age of the gun. The era of social media. An era of resistance and discontent. The age of alternative facts and fake news. Ours is a time awash in distraction and amusements that make it hard to allow ourselves to be reached by God's revelation. In a time when we are consumed by politics, economics, privilege, and grievance, there appears to be little attempt or capacity to recognize the movement of God. I have no doubt that all around us are holy moments, shining stars, miracles even, and yet, a revelatory state of mind eludes us, especially when we are looking over our shoulders, trying to not allow racism, sexism, and xenophobia destroy us. It can be difficult to recognize holy moments when far too many of us are willing to be lied to so we can maintain the status quo. It is challenge to be on the lookout for the movement of God when we are too busy searching only for that which will bless or privilege us individually. It's hard to look out for God when so many of us are looking for food, shelter, medical care, justice. Epiphany challenges all of us to see God, to see the good, to see justice.

"But preacher, I am not sure I know what I am looking for." Perhaps sometimes the issue is less about what we've been looking for than about where we've been looking. In the last few days, we have seen what happens when people refuse to be open to the movement of what is good and right and renewing, when vision is clouded by their worst instincts. Those people who stormed the U.S. Capitol, who let themselves be goaded into terroristic chaos, were looking for renewal in petty, diabolical political leadership. They assumed that the Herods of our day would be the source of life and light. We all must be careful about where we seek revelation. If we are not careful, even our righteous discontent and persistent resistance to the injustices of the world have the potential to divert our attention from the movement of God in our midst. It is easy to miss the signs of change and wonder and newness because the empire has got us so preoccupied, so whipped up, and so fed up. And if there is any doubt what is being revealed, know that the things of God do not countenance cruelty, hatred, or revenge. Herod's murderous intentions were thwarted because these Wise Men remained open to a holy moment.

It may be that the reason far too many of us are unable to have a revelatory state of mind is because, unlike the Magi, we have assumed that the things of God cannot be revealed among the poorest, most vulnerable people among us. Our culture and economy have conditioned us to assume that God is only pleased to dwell or reveal God's self in the spectacle of power, empire, and grandeur. Oh, I invite us to linger just a little longer with those relegated to the margins, with the dominated, the oppressed, and the exploited, for among them perhaps God has something to reveal. I hope we do not avert our gaze too quickly from the cells of the ICE detention centers, for it may be there amid discontent that God may be incarnated. I hope

we do not dismiss the anger among the BLM protestors, for it may be there amid the resistance to business as usual with law enforcement and the killing of unarmed Black people that God may be revealing God's self. I hope we do not turn away from the poor, the hungry, or the prisoner, for it may be among them that God is revealing good news to the world. During this season of Epiphany, I pray that we are blessed with a revelatory state of mind, beckoned always to keep our hearts and minds open to the movement of what is good, loving, and just. May it be so.