

**New St. James Presbyterian Church  
Epiphany of the Lord Sunday  
Sunday, January 5, 2025**

**“By Another Road”  
Matthew 2:1-12**

**The Rev. Dr. David Clark**

Our Gospel Lesson begins: “In the time of King Herod” (v. 1). At first, you might think that’s just a way of expressing the date, much like someone could say, “Oh, that happened back when Mulroney was Prime Minister.” But these words—“In the time of King Herod”—are not just some neutral way of referring to the time. Rather, these words are far more ominous, more menacing—because Herod was famously cruel and paranoid. Herod was a ruler who murdered his wife, “Mariamne, her two sons, her brother, her grandfather, and her mother” (Perowne). Now Herod’s power was propped up by Rome (cf. Hauerwas), but an insecure tyrant is only that much more dangerous. “In the time of King Herod” means this story takes place under the shadow of violence, intimidation, and tyranny.

And it was into this unstable political world that Jesus was born. As one theologian puts it, “Jesus [was] born in an occupied land, a small outpost, on the edge of a mighty empire,” and was “killed under Rome’s authority” (Hauerwas). Jesus was born, as he would die, under political tyranny and oppression. So these opening words—“In the time of King Herod”—these words evoke Herod’s threatening rule...yet, as the story unfolds, it’s the baby who will soon be perceived as the one who threatens Herod.

“In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, 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’” (vv. 1-2). Let that moment sink in: the magi ask Herod—this violent, paranoid, cruel tyrant—they ask him where they can find the *new* king. From Herod’s perspective, the magi may as well have asked: ‘Herod, where’s the young rebel leader, the one who’s gonna overthrow you? We’ve, uh, come to offer him our allegiance.’

For Herod, this is a shockwave, a coup d’état, a test of his power. Herod was so ruthless that he murdered his wife and her family—and now he learns that someone’s been chosen to overthrow him. The message that the magi bring: it threatens Herod’s white-knuckled grip on power; it frightens him. And, as those who’ve lived under oppressive regimes have long known, when a Herod is frightened, it’s bad news for everyone. “When King Herod heard this, he was frightened,” Matthew tells us, “and all Jerusalem with him” (v. 3). Herod is terrified of the newborn king—and everyone else is terrified of Herod.

So Herod does what he does best; he schemes, he conspires, he plots to find and kill this would-be rival. Matthew writes: “and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, [Herod] inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, ‘In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: “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”” (vv. 4-6).

The involvement of the “chief priests and scribes” has sometimes been interpreted as if they were complicit in Herod’s schemes—but in the text, there’s no hint of complicity, because there’s nothing to suggest they were even aware of the magi or their questions. It’s likely they had no idea Herod was exploiting their religious knowledge to hunt down a newborn; all they did was answer a Scriptural question to the best of their ability. (And in any case, it’s ultimately not the scribes *but the star* that gives away the location of baby Jesus.)

Nonetheless, unbeknownst to these religious leaders, their explanation of the Scriptures fed right into Herod’s scheme—and the wheels are now in motion as Herod sends the magi to locate that child king. Though of course, Herod doesn’t tell the magi his actual (violent) motivation; instead, he disguises his scheme as a well-meaning request: “Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 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”” (vv. 7-8).

Now, you already know how this story ends. (I mean, if you didn’t before this morning, then I guess the Word to the Children was a bit of a spoiler.) But if someone was hearing this story for the very first time, then this would be the moment of suspense, this would be the cliff-hanger—because at this moment, we have no idea what the magi are going to do.

Matthew writes: “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. When they saw that the star had stopped” (vv. 9-10)—then what? Had they really been duped into thinking that Herod means well, or are they onto Herod and his violent plans? Will they or won’t they act as Herod’s informants? As the magi close in on baby Jesus, are they in on the whole thing, collaborating to hand over the child to Herod?

Then—cue the suspenseful music—then this comes next: “When they saw that the star had stopped...they were overwhelmed with joy. 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” (vv. 10-11). The story takes a hairpin turn, from suspense and danger...to wonderful, worshipful joy. What our translation has as “they were overwhelmed with joy,” in the original language is literally “they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy” (ἐχάρησαν χαρὰν μεγάλην σφόδρα). For the magi, joy overflows in the presence of the Christ child.

“And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road” (v. 12). Who knows what the magi had initially planned to do; who knows whether they had intended to tell Herod about the child... But whatever their intentions may have been, all that melts away when they draw near to Christ with joy. Until now, the whole story had been working in Herod’s favour; he had determined the location from the scribes and sent in the magi like spies: Herod’s trap was slowly closing in around the child... Then the star stops, joy rises up, and—breathlessly approaching the little king—the magi kneel in worship.

The magi, with this one courageous act of defiance—by refusing to return to Herod, instead taking another road—with this one act of defiance, the magi derail Herod’s entire plan, and the child slips through his grasp. The magi had seen Herod’s dazzling power, his capacity to reward or punish; and the magi had also seen little Jesus, with no wealth or power at all. And yet, once the magi had met Christ and worshipped him, they became loyal to him—and that’s it. One road led back to Herod, where lavish rewards would await their betrayal of the child; the other road led to danger instead of reward (who knows whether Herod would hunt them down upon realizing he’d been betrayed). But given the choice between reward with Herod or uncertainty with Christ, they chose Christ.

This story began under the shadow of Herod, but it ends—or at least, this part of the story ends—by defying that tyrant, with a moment of worship, a courageous decision, and the uncertainty of a new road. And all of it—the whole story—it all hinges on that courageous decision to disobey Herod, choosing instead loyalty to Christ.

Now, obviously, our day-to-day decisions are usually quite a bit less dramatic than the decision the magi faced. But I do think that we, like them, must often decide where to place our loyalty, including when we face big decisions in our lives; I think that we, like them, can find our loyalty to Christ tested, and we may be tempted to betray Christ in order to secure rewards or to take the easy way.

Yet then we may follow the model of the magi—the model of worship and courage and loyalty to Christ—so that, when we are faced with the decision between Herod and Christ, we can find the courage to choose loyalty to Christ when it matters most. May we, like the magi, kneel before Christ in worship, find new courage, and accept the uncertainties that come from the life of faith, even when it means we must follow “another road” (v. 12). Amen.