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11 o'clock am

Community Church of Issaquah
Issaquah, Washington

"By Another Road"
Matthew 2:1-12; Ephesians 3:1-12

Every year as the New Year's countdown begins, I go through this little routine. The farther and farther the Times Square ball drops, the more I cling to the old year. There's this anxiety. It's like oh my gosh this year is almost gone, I haven't done everything I wanted to! Where did all the time go? My life is slipping away from me! 5, 4, 3, and all I can think is "Cling to 2015," 2, 1...and then it's oh it's 2016 now. Okay.

Now this strikes me as a very unchristian way to herald in the New Year. It strikes me as unchristian because today is Epiphany Sunday. And if Epiphany teaches us anything, it teaches us *that we do not have to fear the new*.

Being unafraid of the new is not something humans are naturally inclined toward. We're wired to fear what we haven't encountered before. First days of school, new jobs, new people we haven't met before, new ideas, maybe even new pastors ☺.

Yet, on Epiphany, we are given another road to travel the world by, a road that takes us away from fear and makes us new. It's the road of the magi who saw a new star in the sky and who weren't afraid of it—even when it took them to new lands filled with new people.

Now a couple of interesting facts about the Magi (These are just to take home to impress your friends with). First of all the Bible never says there are three of them! The story that there were three comes only hundreds of years after the New Testament was written. And second, we often call the magi "wise men," but a better translation of the word "magi" is actually "astrologers." Magi would have served in royal

courts, trying to tell the future from signs that they saw up in the heavens.

Now, I don't know about you, but when I hear that I think, what in the world? The holy story of God's salvation is beginning with star-gazers and fortune-tellers? If you're thinking the same thing as me, you're in good company. Magi would have been about the last folk that devout Jews and early Christians would have expected to be a part of God's sacred plans. Astrology was condemned and scoffed at as fakery by devout believers.

And yet. These magi are the ones tuned in to the new thing God is doing in Bethlehem. They willingly follow the star into a new country, all the way to the court of Herod where they ask him about this new king of the Jews they want to worship.

Now Herod, Herod is not so excited about this new news. You see, rulers like Herod rule by fear. "And like all who rule by fear, the last thing Herod, or those he rules, wants is to be surprised. It cannot, therefore, be good news that strangers appear believing a king has been born."¹

New kings popping up can only be seen as threats to rulers like Herod. New kings are threats because Herod and the all the little Herods after him know that their power is not secure. Herods constantly have to watch their backs to keep their positions of power "because any change may well make their insecure positions more insecure."²

¹ Stanley Hauerwas, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible, "Matthew," pg 39.

² Stanley Hauerwas, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible, "Matthew."

In this particular case, King Herod's insecure position was that he was only king of Judea because the Roman government was using him as a pawn. He was half-Jewish and so was a buffer between the foreign Empire and its Jewish subjects. The Jews could smell a rat, however, and Herod was roundly hated by those he ruled. Herod ruled between a rock and a hard place: the threat of Roman cruelty on the one side and his lack of true authority on the other. His position was founded on instability because it was founded on threats and fear.

In this kind of an atmosphere, the new is a threat. And Herods, they know what to do with threats. They squash them. They suppress them. They get rid of them. What we didn't read today is that Herod after catching wind of this new king, goes on to murder all of the children in Bethlehem under the age of two to try to protect his own position in power.

It's no mistake that Herod's violence is directed against children. As the theologian Stanley Hauerwas says, "Children rightly frighten us, pulling us as they do into an unknown future." Children make our futures uncertain. The little baby we hold in our arms in the hospital room is changing and will change all of the parts of our lives in ways that we can't even expect. Even the most planned for baby brings about an entirely unplanned for world. It's no wonder that Herod's fear and violence is directed against beings that bring so much uncertainty. When you're ruling in fear you can't keep uncertainty around you.

In the face uncertainty, Herod turns to the source of his power, and Herod's power, rooted in fear, is undergirded the threat of death. His ability—and the ability of Herods ever since—*to take life* in order to stomp out a new, uncertain future is the foundation of their rule.

If that is Herod's power then Herod *should be* afraid of this new king. Because this new king's

power is a power not from fear or from death. This infant king's power comes from a completely different source. See this new king come *by* love and *from* love. He comes from the God who in fact *is* love. He has power, but it is only power insofar as it is the power of the love that created the heavens and the earth. A power that will go on to heal the blind and to calm the raging seas.

This is a love that doesn't limit itself to Israel, but includes even astrologers coming from a far away land. It's an expansive love, a love that doesn't need to buckle down and tighten up, but a love that extends itself to the least of these and the outsider. It's a love that changes the direction of our lives.

After the magi find this new king, Jesus, the Bible tells us they did not go back to Herod, but that they returned to their own country "by another road." The infant King shows the magi that not all roads have to lead back to Herod, not all paths in the world run through fear and violence and the threat of death. There is another way. There is an alternative to Jerusalem with its intrigues and unholy alliances. There is way that doesn't have to trust in Herod for security in an insecure world. Instead, there's a group of people who in gathering around this newborn king can refuse to walk the way of the world.

I think sometimes we miss how radical a thing God is doing in Jesus. The word radical is from the word "radix" meaning root. Radical simply means that the difference goes all the way down to the roots. It goes to the heart of something. The radical thing that God is doing is that in Jesus the Lord is creating alternative political life—an alternative to all of the political scheming and violence that characterizes life in the world.

You know, I think we miss how radical God's work in Jesus is because many Christians have what my dad calls "stinkin' thinkin'" about what

is public and what is private. We have this idea that there are two realms. One is public. One is private. When we divide up the world like this, our faith becomes a private matter, just between ourselves and God.

We Baptists are especially prone to this way of thinking because we have such strong convictions about the separation of church and state. Our history as Baptists has shown us that when the church and state are too closely aligned with one another minority groups, like we once were, are persecuted. We don't want our faith to be dictated to us by the government and rightly so.

And yet today, on Epiphany, Herod and the magi and the newborn King complicate our neatly ordered separation of private and public. What we lose when we say that our faith is a private matter is the fact that in Jesus, God is doing something new not just in our hearts, but that God is setting up a whole other world. God is bringing into being a new alternative way of life to Herod. God is bringing together a group of people who are able to escape from the powers of death and violence and fear by another road. God is creating the church. See, the public, the political, is merely what is done together. It's what's done in a group rather than just alone.

God's work to create the church is a political work. The church, the people gathered around the newborn King is fundamentally a public event. It's a political work that looks completely different from the politics of Herod and the world. Maybe an example would help make this clear

About a year ago, the church I was serving in Dallas had a very unexpected event happen. One of our newer members, a refugee from Liberia, had her fiancé move over from Liberia to be with her and their son. Well after arriving, it was very tragically discovered that he had Ebola. He was the first person in the U.S. to have Ebola—and it

was national news. Because they were immigrants my church became the point of contact between the media and this couple.

In the strangest twist, I was scheduled to preach the Sunday after all of this broke. When I got up on our chancel that morning our balcony was lined with news cameras. ABC, NBC, CNN, Univision, all of the major networks were there, and I would be lying if I said I wasn't absolutely terrified to be preaching with all those cameras!

But as I was sitting there in the service preparing to preach, I realized: What is the important thing going on here? The important thing, the thing that really matters, the thing that really has the global impact, is not the power of a million people seeing you on TV. The thing that matters is the community that has gathered to worship the newborn King. The thing that matters is the power of a love that has pulled us together, a love that is taking us by another road. What matters is our communal life which is organized here at the church, but isn't bound by these walls and isn't cut off from the real world by an imagined wall of separation between religion and the world. What matters is the other road of Jesus Christ.

This is what I mean by a politics that is not Herod's politics or the world's politics. It's a public life that doesn't have to fear the outsider. Just like God did not fear the Eastern travellers, the Magi, we didn't have to fear our Liberian refugees friends. The church's politics, our way of organizing our common life, was to welcome them and the gifts that they brought to our community. The world's politics was that of fear: the fear of disease and contamination and infection.

The church's ways when they are God's ways are very different than the world's ways. This is the radical nature of the Gospel. This is how the Gospel goes to the very root of things, digging

up all the fear and insecurity that leads to violence.

Perfect love casts out all fear. Perfect love refuses to use death as a weapon. Perfect love leads to a group of people who are pulled together by a newborn king and then sent out by another road. Perfect love, incarnate in Jesus, that is *our* politics.