

**Matthew 2:1-12**

*A Wise Welcome*

First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, Alabama

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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.’ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he 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.” ’

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.’ 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, 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. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

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If Godzilla were to appear in human form, I’m guessing he would look like a 400-foot toddler—because nothing is more terrifying or destructive than a toddler on the loose. Imagine one taller than a house, thundering through the streets of Birmingham on giant, dimpled legs. You know how a toddler has all the manual dexterity of a jeweler, and all the escape skills of Houdini, but no sense of

judgment or danger? Imagine what could be set loose, and what could be toppled, by a *giant* toddler. No monument would be safe, no icon left standing.

That's precisely why Herod was terrified when he heard through the wise ones about this new child who had been born. Herod bore the title of King, but was a political appointee of Rome's, with only the most tenuous claim to the throne. His reign could easily be toppled by a child from the house of David, so he was determined to destroy the child before the child destroyed him.

Oddly enough, though, the wise ones who ended up sheltering Jesus from Herod's wrath were, themselves, foreigners. Pilgrims who had no claim to the King of the Jews, yet had come to worship him. They were duped into revealing Jesus' existence to Herod, but when they learned in a dream what Herod's true intentions were, they sneaked out of the country by a different route so as not to have to betray Jesus' whereabouts.

Today, we are observing "Epiphany," a word that simply means "manifestation." The reason the church has given the name "epiphany" to the day when the visitors from the east arrived in Bethlehem is because that is when the Messiah was made manifest to foreigners. With this epiphany, we learn that it isn't only religious insiders who may kneel before him, but seekers from every place and background. In other words, anyone can be a citizen of Jesus' realm.

But why do these foreigners react so differently to the child than Herod does? Why does Herod fear and hate Jesus, while the wise ones travel far to worship him? It all has to do with what they're seeking. Herod is seeking to batten down the hatches and hold onto things as they are. He fears the child, because the child can change everything. The wise ones worship the child because they hope he *will* change everything. The gifts they bring are royal gifts—gold, frankincense, and myrrh—to acknowledge the child's potential power.

No one who becomes a parent for the first time realizes quite how much power their new child will have to change their lives. This goes far beyond switching from stoneware to Corell, or from fine dining to the Golden Arches. It's a total paradigm shift that upends your priorities, changing your whole way of life and your whole worldview. It's a total transformation. Not all of those changes are welcome, but for those who are happy to be parents, the cost of those changes is a more-than-acceptable tradeoff for the gain, which is the wonder and joy of their relationship with their child.

Herod, to his great loss and to the grief of many, resisted the change that the Christ-child represented. He tried to keep his world small and controllable.

According to Matthew, as soon as he knew that the wise ones had tricked him, he had all the boys of Jesus' age slaughtered. What he didn't know was that Jesus and

his family had already left the country. Soon after that, Herod, himself, was dead, while Jesus was alive and well and living in Egypt. Herod's sense of control over his own destiny had been an illusion that had caused tremendous suffering while gaining him nothing.

The wise ones, though, had already been looking beyond themselves and their world. By following the star to the Christ-child, they left their country and their comfort zone far behind. When they finally found Jesus, they weren't afraid of the change he brought into their lives. Instead, we're told, "they were overwhelmed with joy."

So if you're seeking the Christ-child, here's what you'll find: a child who sends the false idols of our culture and of our lives crashing to the floor, who laughs at our assumptions of how our world should be, who doesn't recognize the hierarchies of society or the petty bigotries of race or religion or nation. Instead, this child welcomes all who come to worship him.

That means that if we follow his star, we had better be braced for change.

So here we are, at the beginning of a new year and a new decade. Who knows what changes this decade will bring? Change isn't always good, of course. With the threats of a nuclear launch from North Korea and a potential war with Iran, an

impeachment trial underway in Washington, and Australia going up in flames, we know that sometimes, change can mean a heavy blanket of doom thrown over the whole world. So why seek change, when change can cost us so much?

Because change will come, whether we seek it or not; but the change that comes from God is *not* the change that smothers light and chokes out life. Change that comes from God is as unpredictable and risky as a marauding toddler, and it brings the same overwhelming joy. It doesn't just change the world, it transforms the world, and it transforms us. Like a bright light in the night sky, it makes us wake up from our dull fatalism about the way the world works, and begin to live in hope.

So, in the epiphany of this new time, let's stop trying to get in the way of change, because that can only bring pain. If, like Herod, we're trying to cling to political or religious or economic advantages that we've held at the expense of others, it's time to let those go. The light of epiphany is drawing us toward a world in which the old boundaries don't count. Fighting that reality can only lead to suffering for others, which will eventually be turned back on us.

And if we've tried to protect ourselves from the upheaval of political uncertainty by refusing to listen to dissenting viewpoints or foreign perspectives, it's time to let that go. In the story of Epiphany we learn that lethal lies can come from leaders

close at hand, while wisdom can come from afar. There is still much wisdom in the world, and we need to be ready to welcome it, wherever it comes from.

And if we've closed our eyes and ears to the reality of Climate Change because we don't want to alter our lifestyle, it's time to let that go, as well. In the face of raging wildfires and rising sea levels and rampaging hurricanes, no one is immune to the impact of global warming. The light of epiphany calls us to look beyond ourselves to the good of the whole world, and to seek that good with open-minded curiosity and a willingness to sacrifice so that all can live.

Welcoming new life and seeking new light always calls for both openness and sacrifice. I'm guessing it wasn't easy for those ancient seekers to explain to their friends and relatives why they would pack up their camels to follow a star to God-only-knew-where. But that's the point. God *did* know where. And by trusting God to guide their journey, they arrived to find overwhelming joy.

So, let's seek change wisely—with eagerness and wonder by following the light God shines before us. Let's seek change wisely—with savvy discernment, so as not to be led astray by falsehoods. Let's seek change wisely, by considering: will this change limit our sense of welcome, or expand it? Will it benefit only us, or will it create a better life for everyone?

The child has already been born. The star in the sky is already shining. It's time to load up our camels. It may be a hard road, and we may need to shed some baggage along the way, but the star is lighting the path ahead, and if we walk that path with courage and steadfast faith, then, when we arrive at what's awaiting us, we, like the wise ones before us, will find joy that overwhelms us all. Thanks be to God.