

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Mary Newberg Gale
Sunday, January 4, 2026

Siblings in Christ, I invite you to join me in a spirit of prayer as we come before God's word. Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we are grateful for the way that you have moved in our life. We are grateful that you have brought us to this place for this time. Thank you for that spirit's work in us. And we ask you to once again open our hearts and our minds that we might hear your words of comfort and your words of challenge as they speak to us across the centuries. Amen.

As Whitney shared with the children, our scripture lesson this morning is from Matthew, chapter 2. And we'll start with verse one and read through verse 12 and then skip a bit to pick up with verse 16. And this is our final Sunday in our Advent Christmastide sermon series, Insisting Upon Hope. So I invite you to hear these words from the Gospel of Matthew.

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men came from the east to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we have observed his star at its rising and have come to pay him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all of Jerusalem with him. When King Herod heard this, he called together all the chief priests and the scribes of the people and 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, the wise men set out, and there ahead of them went the star that they had seen at its rising. They followed the star 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 they 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.

Picking up at verse 16.

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were 2 years old and under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah. "A voice was heard in Rama wailing and loud lamentation. Rachel weeping for her children. She refused to be consoled because they are no more."

Friends, these are the words of our Lord. Thanks be to God.

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As I mentioned, we are in the last Sunday of our Advent Christmastide sermon series, which is why my stole is not liturgically appropriate. But considering we are celebrating the feast of the Epiphany, I thought that my giant star here was appropriate for our conversation. We are beginning, we are ending this series where we began this series. We are still in the time of King Herod. Herod and his family haunt the story of Jesus. Herod is king here at his birth. His son is king at his death, who taunts him during the passion week of our Gospels. Herod and his family were the Roman protectorate's appointed governors. They oversaw an occupied territory. They were collaborators. They were empire. Our text points it out to us when it says that when Herod heard the words of the magi, he was afraid and all of Jerusalem trembled. That speaks powerfully to how dangerous Herod was as a ruler. Now, usually when we hear this story and we visualize this story of the Magi, it happens around Christmas. We see a manger and Mary and a baby and the shepherds and the angels and then the wise men with their three gifts coming all at the same time. But the truth is, the wise men would have been much later than that night of Jesus's birth, as the text intimates, sometime in the first two years of Jesus's life. And what we know about the Magi is often dictated by what cultural stories we tell. Now, we do know that they were from the East. They were likely from Phoenicia. So they themselves were also part of an occupied territory once they had been conquered by Alexander the Great and were now under Roman occupation as well. They come, as I said, much later in the story, and their gender and their number is not specified. In fact, the word used that we describe as magi was a word that was gender non-specific, and both men and women used that title in ancient Phoenicia. But we, the western world, have said three gifts, three kings, they were wise, they must have been men. And then we imagine the three gifts, the three kings and the three wise men. But the text says nothing of the sort. An unspecified number of fairly wealthy individuals who could have taken a long journey searching for wisdom and knowledge, they arrive in Jerusalem, and they go to the king and they ask to see the king of the Jews who had just been born. This was political dynamite. There's no real way around that. Herod and all of the retainers there in the palace would have immediately tensed up. They knew the implications of this birth that astrologers, stargazers came from afar, were compelled upon this journey to see a child who had just been born. That kind of power challenges the power and established authority. And, indeed, when Herod's power is challenged, when things don't go the way that he wants them to, he responds explicitly in the way of empire. He fosters destruction, fear, and despair. That's what our text tells us. And yet the Magi, on their journey as they gather with Christ, are not led by those same compulsions and passions. They could have stayed home. This thing that they saw in the sky could have been terrifying to them. In those days there was a firm belief that what you saw in the sky reflected what was happening on earth. They were signs and portents, and when they saw one, rather than being afraid they were curious and they traveled a long way to find this star. And then when they

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find the place where the star had stopped, the text tells us they are overcome with joy. They seek, they kneel, they listen, they pay him homage. It's a repeated phrase that our text uses. First the Magi say it, and then Herod and then the Magi do the action there with Mary and Jesus. And the word, the Greek word 'proskuneo' was used to describe the actual prostrating of oneself at the feet of a king that all of the people were required to do. So, it's no wonder that when the Magi arrived at Herod's castle and said that they wanted to prostrate themselves at the feet of the new king, Herod and his cohort were scared and angry. But that's exactly what the wise men did. They came and they offered the Christ child homage, both their worship and their gifts. And the text tells us they went home by another way. They went home changed and reoriented.

Too often, in my opinion, we skip over the second half of the text that we read today in Matthew, the text that is titled the Slaughtering of the Innocents, frankly, because it's an uncomfortable story. Also in our lectionary that text appears the first Sunday following Christmas. And no one, no preacher anywhere wants to talk about the slaughtering of children the Sunday right after the big celebration of Christmas when friends and family are in town and we are still riding that high. It's not the kind of text that we like. And yet it feels like the central message that the writer of Matthew's gospel is trying to convey to us, at least from my perspective, because this miracle had happened. The skies opened and Jesus was born, and wise men came from afar and they worshiped the Christ child. And even in all of that, Mary and Joseph and Jesus and the magi and the shepherds and the angels that the Gospel of Luke talks about, they all continue to exist in the time of King Herod, even after the birth of the Messiah. They exist in a world dominated by empire, focused on power and might, sustained by oppression, a world that continues the cycle of consumption on the backs of the poor. The birth of the Christ child did not change that overnight. And yet the power of the gospel, the power of the good news, the reason we tell this story of Emmanuel again and again and again is that God so loved the world in all of its ugliness, that God did not shy away from it. God didn't leave the world to the time of King Herod to misery and to pain. Emmanuel, God with us, is with us where the pain is in the midst of this world.

So at Christmas, in the midst of occupation and oppression, the people heard the good news, "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a savior". in the midst of the muck and the dirty and the ugly. To you this day.

I think it's even more important that we hear this story of the slaughter of the innocents and that we don't breeze past it, because, friends, we live in the time of King Herod. You and I exist in a time of empire and violence and arrogance and distrust. It is not much different from then. We gather to hear the word of God's promised hope in the face of a broken and fearful world. We turn on our televisions, or we look out on our streets, and we see the disappearing of our Latin

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American siblings. We see the disproportionate incarceration of the poor in this country—the poor who are most often our siblings of color. We wrestle with watching extrajudicial killings and international war crimes on a daily basis.

Not just other countries, but our own.

No matter what you think of the president of Venezuela, the ridiculousness of kidnapping a sovereign of another country, and in the middle of the night, and bringing them to face charges in our nation where they have never lived is a violation of the way that we have agreed to live in the world. It's a violation of the way God has called us to be because it is the way of empire. And thus, as we sit and list in the middle of this, we, friends, we know how easy it is to succumb to despair, to succumb to our fears. We know how easy it can be to break in the face of empire. We know how our bodies respond with fight, flee, freeze, and fawn when we respond to fear. And, thus, we gather each week to insist upon hope because we need to hear it. A hope that is grounded not in what we feel but in what we do and in what we believe to be true about God and about us. Hope that is active, that is collaborative, that is barrierbreaking. Hope that is based on the story of our God who hears the cries of the people and rescues them from bondage each and every time. Hope that is based in Emmanuel, God with us. Hope is the story that we live each and every day, friends. A hope that is mercifully not at all dependent upon you and me, but rests in our God. We have this vision that epiphanies are those things that resettle us. The moment when the light bulb goes off and the world begins to make sense. But in scripture, epiphanies are not always warm or personal. They're disruptive. They're even dangerous. Most often epiphanies of God lead to confrontation with empire. They ask us to cross the borders we have created in our lives. Hope for us is like the Magi going home by another way. Hope is figuratively and maybe sometimes literally shifting the path of our journey. It's a conscious choice to frame things differently, to be guided by different stars than the stars of empire. Hope is active. It's not simply a feeling. It is something we live and do.

Today we are going to partake in something that I have always wanted to do at a church that I have served. We are going to take the opportunity to celebrate the Epiphany by picking up a star word. Much like the star guided those Magi, we have words available here. There are some on the communion table here and there are some out in the narthex, words that are business card size, all sorts of words. And I encourage you as you come forward for communion, after you've received communion and you are making your way back to your seat, to stop here or out at the table in the narthex and grab a star word, and that this word, whichever one you receive, may help be a lens through which you find another way home in the face of empire and despair. Put it on your, put it on a mirror somewhere where you see it every morning. If you're a journaler, this

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is a great thing to put in your journal. Return to it in the coming days and weeks and months as a way to experience God's spirit guiding you toward hope, guiding you toward a different path than the one that the world lays out for us. Because the beauty of Epiphany, the beauty of Christmastide is that God's providence is with us, in the midst of all of the things that are wrong. that God has come to be with us, to lead and guide us and through us to shine a light in the darkness that the darkness will never overcome. Even when we feel overwhelmed, even when we feel scared and full of despair, that light shines from us. Friends, that is my hope as we insist upon it in this coming year, that the light of God's star may guide each and every one of us as we move forward in our journey. Amen.