

“Do not be afraid.” That is the through-line throughout scripture. Even in the Garden of Eden after the fall, after Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, they hide from God, but God provides for them permanent covering; God lovingly replaces their flimsy leaves.

During our Christmas Eve service, we read from Genesis to Exodus to Joshua to Judges to Chronicles to Lamentations to Jeremiah to Isaiah to Matthew to Luke to John to Acts, all these different ways God tells us, “Do not fear. Do not be afraid. When you hear my voice in the garden do not hide from me. I love you.” The gospel is good news of great joy for all people: any version of Christianity that tries to make you afraid so you stay and obey and pay up is antithetical to God’s message of love and salvation for all creation.

Do not be afraid. That’s the lens through which we get to read scripture, that’s the pair of clean glasses that Jesus Christ blesses us with. We get to see everything through that understanding, that God is Love, and perfect Love casts out all fear.

After reading through the story with an ear for all the love and determined reassurance of God, finding the words “do not fear” in story after Bible story, I guess it’s not surprising I noticed where fear shows up again in today’s passage.

The magi have traveled far. They study the heavens. They watch for signs of important events. They have “seen this star at its rising” and they know a king has been born. They go to the King in Jerusalem, Herod. They ask him, “Where is the child?” And King Herod, after hearing of this new born king, is frightened. He is afraid. Why?

Herod is afraid because he is the one who has power. The Roman overlords have placed him, a puppet ruler, on the throne in Jerusalem. Herod wants to keep Rome happy, and he wants to pass his position on from his shoulders to his sons. “A new king of the Jews will not only threaten his own position and that of his heirs, the very rumors may bring Rome crashing down on him like a fist. Herod knows how to deal with messianic movements and tax revolts. In short order – beyond the bounds of today’s text – he orders the slaughter of every baby boy in the town of Bethlehem.” (Barbara Brown Taylor, *Feasting on the Word Year C Vol. 1* pg. 214)

When Herod hears the good news that God is sending a savior, the messiah, a shepherd ruler, a gentle leader of the beloved children, Israel, he does not think it is good news. If God is

at work in the world, if God is setting up the upside-down kingdom – where the King is born in a small town like Bethlehem, where a star informs gentile, spiritual-but-not-religious outsiders, of the inner workings of the God of Israel, where promises made by an insignificant deity to an insignificant conquered people are actually being kept – that is not good news for Herod. Herod wants to set up his kingdom. Not an upside-down kingdom of God, but a predictable as the world would have it kingdom of human hands. Herod wants to keep oppressing the poor, silencing the outcry, fitting in with and impressing the powerful people of his day. Of course he is afraid. God is trying to get in his way. And Herod goes to terrible lengths to try to thwart God’s plan. Thank God it doesn’t work.

What if God had shown up in a dream to Herod and told him: Do not be afraid. You need saving too and Jesus came to save you just as much as to save the outsiders – traveling from far away, and the shepherds – stinking of poverty and shame. Just as much as Jesus came for the foreigners and the farmers, Jesus came for you too, Herod. You are so afraid of losing control, of losing power, of losing status, and it’s eating you up and you’ve created your own personal hell of weeping and gnashing of teeth. You don’t have to stay there. God has sent the savior! Do not be afraid. It’s wonderful to hand your perceived control and power and status over to God and allow Love to be the law that leads to life, to heaven on earth! It’s wonderful to enter into the upside-down kingdom and watch how God works and join in the mission. Whose to say God didn’t show up in a dream, and Herod just didn’t listen?

Instead, Herod responds to the good news with fear, and the fear leads to anger and violence and pain. The wise men from the East respond to the good news differently. They get just a small pin prick of light and hope, but they pay attention. They meet that small tug on their hearts with determination, curiosity, and perseverance. They chase it down. They seek it out. They travel through the dark until they find the light again. And then, when they finally discover what they were seeking for, they experience overwhelming joy.

The scene is a beautiful one to behold. They enter the house, they see the child with Mary, they kneel down and they pay him homage. They open their treasure, they offer him gifts. Generous gifts! Opulent gifts! Pastor Stephen Bauman writes: “Not every committed Christian in name has a taste for actually kneeling in the dust and muck of a barn in a backwater

town with astonished recognition that this is where God prefers to make an entrance.” But these radical travelers recognize that something amazing is here.

It is from these foreigners that we have inherited the tradition of gift giving at Christmas. In response to the incredible generosity of God, they give abundantly generous and joyful gifts of their own. Herod was the ultimate insider, he should have had a front row seat to seeing God at work in the world, but he missed it. The Magi were the ultimate outsiders, gentiles who didn't even quite know they were seeking the messiah, the savior of the world, until they encountered the Christ child, and they don't miss a thing. We celebrate the outsiders on this Epiphany Sunday.

The Greek word epiphaneia means “revelation” or “manifestation.” The Magi saw in a bright light in the sky, a manifestation of the divine, and they moved closer to it without fear. God has promised before, if you seek God, you will find God. Barbara Brown Taylor asserts that epiphanies are not only found in ancient history and Holy Scripture. The Holy Spirit is still at work in our lives and we can use today's holy story to help us “recall the ordinary and extraordinary ways in which the light of Christ has appeared to (us) in (our) own lives and the lives of those (we) love.” We need to recognize where we are able to see the light. We need to tell one another about the stars we see appearing overhead. We need to share about the moments of wonder and beauty we experience, when we feel closest the God who tells us, “Do not be afraid.” “When we tell the stories of our encounters with God – in community, in nature, in relationship, in the chambers of our own hearts – we give testimony to the ongoing revelation of the Word made flesh.” That, beloved, is what we are called to do. We are called to generosity of our time, talents, tithes and testimonies.

The magi remind us that God is infinitely generous, “God actually gives God's self, there is no way to enter the economy established by the Christ child as equals or to offer anything in return that can match the gift that has been given.” (William J. Danaher Jr.) And yet we do give, because God's generosity inspires our generosity. Maybe you're not one for New Year's Resolutions, but they can be a marker, a promise, a hope for growth. So, if you don't have one yet, or you want one more to add to your list, I hope it can be your New Year's resolution in 2022 to think about how you can give a testimony. Come meet with me, I'll help you write it down and share it with the church family either on a Sunday morning or in a newsletter article

or in some other creative way. We, like the magi, are on this journey together and we don't have to be afraid, and when we find what we seek, when we get a glimpse or a glimmer, our joy is overwhelming and we must share it. Share it with one another. Share it with the world.

The Gospel of Matthew starts with astrologers from foreign nations being the first to acknowledge Jesus as God's anointed king. The Gospel of Matthew ends with the risen Jesus giving the final command to carry the gospel to all nations, including them via baptism into God's new chosen people. (Paul J. Achtemeier) It's a reminder that this good news: this reality that God is for us not against us, this gospel message that we do not need to be afraid, is not something we keep to ourselves. We tell it on the mountain, over the hills and everywhere. We glorify and enjoy God, make disciples and serve human need. We teach people, by example, to follow the way of Love that Jesus taught us. And we hold on to Jesus' promise: we do not need to be afraid, because God is with us until the very end of the age.

So, beloved, when you have found him, do not keep him to yourself. Do not be afraid, like Herod. Be overwhelmed with joy like the wise men. And give your testimony: by what light do you see God?

I can't wait to hear your stories.