

“Fear Doesn’t Stop Us!”

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Sunday, January 4, 2026

Text: Matthew 2: 1-12

What a familiar story it is, the story of the “three wise men”. The problem is that really isn’t the story that comes from Matthew’s Gospel. Be prepared to be challenged by the original text and eye-opening scholarship that I hope to share with you this morning not to ruin the story for you, but to expand it. Like many stories from our Bible, we have so domesticated this story that we miss out on the main message that is here. In the words of our friend, Dr. Boyung Lee, “At first glance, the story of the magi may seem like a quiet epilogue to the drama of Jesus’ birth. But Matthew 2: 1-12 is not a quaint tale about wise men bearing gifts; it is revolutionary narrative—rooted in the clash of empires and the courage to pursue truth despite fear.” She further challenges the notion that the wise men were men. It’s quite likely that there were more than three, and that both men and women were part of this group of astrologers. I’ll say more about that later. The point is that this story, framed in new ways (I think ways it should have been in the first place), can lead us to what we need in the midst of fear. AND...more importantly...we will find where the Christ child appears in our lives, in our struggles, in our pain, and in our suffering. Our domestication of this story has not served us well, as it removes the critical points about how God works in the midst of a fearful, hurtful, violent and oppressive world. In the end, I hope we learn that fear doesn’t stop us—just as it didn’t stop the magi.

We get to learn some Greek again. In case you didn't know, this is the original language of the New Testament. Matthew specifically uses the names "*magoi apo anatolon*" which translate to simply "magi from the east—but leaves their number, gender and religion unspecified. Further, the term is rooted in Old Persian, [and] refers to a priestly class in Zoroastrianism, a tradition that included both women and men. Dr. Lee writes, "Their presence challenges more than geography. It disrupts the boundaries of who belongs in God's story—crossing lines of ethnicity, gender, and religious identity. Their journey is not simply homage. It is a bold reordering, a radical widening of divine love."

That, my friends, is good news! Whenever we can widen divine love, I believe that we've gotten closer to the true nature of God. God is the embodiment of love and is most often found on the margins of societies around the world. That doesn't mean that God doesn't love everyone, but that God especially loves those who the powers of the world reject. What if, instead of royal men, we could see wise women crossing boundaries of religion, ethnicity and culture to stand in solidarity with a marginalized mother and child?

In his Christmas Eve sermon in 2016, Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb, a Palestinian Christian preaching from Bethlehem, gave a powerful sermon. In that sermon, he challenges all of us to see the deeper realities of the Christmas story in both Gospels. He writes:

The setting of the Christmas story is so real and has nothing to do with the glitter and glamour of Christmas time. It is set in Occupied Palestine, a country occupied by the Romans. A young couple from Nazareth is forced by the occupiers to go and register. Registration is a means to control those occupied, control their movement, and control their income and taxes. And so Joseph and Mary had to come to Bethlehem to get here their magnetic cards. Then we hear from the Magi, who came from the East to visit the child of Bethlehem and to adore him but were stopped at the borders by Herod's security guards and were harassed and interrogated for the

simple reason that they told the truth, in that they were going to Bethlehem...Then we hear of massacres of innocent children dying for no reason except Herod wanted to terrorize Palestine's population and to spread fear. And then we see the young family seeking refuge in Egypt; they became refugees on the way in order to escape Herod's terror...The Christmas story is a mirror of our story. There we find our reality as ugly as it is without any camouflage. In that story we see ourselves in a clear mirror without any mask. In that story we see the damage that was done to humankind.

Dr. Raheb is then asked by a journalist, "if the Christmas story is a mirror of our painful reality, where then is the gospel in it? Where is the good news? Where is the hope?"

How would you answer? How do you answer that question in your own lives? If the gospel is good news, how do you see good news right now in your life? Where is God active in ways you can see, feel, touch and know? Or is God just some being in the sky that will make all things good after our miserable lives are over? I know that's a crass way to ask the question, but I think a lot of us read, hear and maybe believe the stories in our Bible, but we don't see how they apply in our lives. We cannot see how God is at work in our world which isn't a heck of a lot different than the one Jesus was born into. It's critical that we see God at work. It's imperative that we come to know God as active in our lives. It means everything that we have the presence of God right here, and right now. Fear tells us that God is dead. Or that God is active somewhere else. Or that God loves someone else. Or... And yet, our Biblical narrative is clear that Jesus is Emmanuel—God with us. How would we answer the journalist?

Here is Dr. Rahab's answer:

The gospel is this: When the fullness of time came, the time for the Word to be incarnated, God did not choose Rome or Athens for Christ to be born at; He chose occupied Bethlehem. He chose to be one of those oppressed; He chose to be one of those terrorized. When the fullness of time came, God so loved the world with all of its ugliness and did not shy away from it. God chose to encounter this world with

all its might and terror. He chose to challenge Herod with the face of an innocent child. God did not leave this world to its misery and pain but embraced it with both hands and pulled it to his heart. And so in the midst of the Roman occupation and oppression, the people of Palestine heard the good news of “Do not be afraid, for unto you is born a savior, Christ the Lord.” And in the darkest hours of the long night, the shepherds saw great light and heard the angels giving God the glory. This is the crux of the Christmas story.

Friends, Matthew 2 is no fairy tale. It is a political and theological narrative. Dr. Lee adds, “From the first verse, we are reminded: this story takes place ‘In the time of King Herod’ a puppet ruler of the Roman Empire known for violent paranoia...Fear permeates this story. Herod is afraid. Jerusalem trembles. Yet the magi do not turn back. They travel through uncertainty, seeking truth.” That is our call for 2026. We always hope that the new year improves on the old. That is not always the case. Fear can still permeate our personal and collective stories. And yet, “Let us believe, with trembling hope, that fear does not have the last word.” We’re invited to let fear lead us forward, rather than to flee or freeze. We’re invited to let love lead us forward.

The reality is that “Epiphanies are not always warm or personal. Sometimes they are disruptive, even dangerous. Sometimes they lead to confrontation with empire. Sometimes they ask us to cross borders. Sometimes they send us home by another way. But always they ask, ‘Will we move the way fear makes us move? Or will we move the way love calls us to?’”

Rumi writes, “Don’t move the way fear makes you move.”

Dr. Lee ends her commentary on this passage with lots of questions and a few answers. Her writing is challenging, yet amazing. I offer it to you as invitation as we enter

this new year together. This is a year that may include a Herod or two. And yet, the good news enters in when we least expect it. Here's Dr. Lee's ending:

...the magi move by the light of revelation, not the shadows of fear. Who are the magi among us today—those willing to cross borders for truth and love? Who are the Marys, holding the Christ child in fragile arms, waiting for a knock at the door? And who are the Herods, terrified their illegitimate power might be exposed by light? In the face of fear, let us travel together. Let us defy empire not with swords, but with solidarity. Let us kneel in awe, not before the powerful, but before the powerless Christ, whose birth marks the beginning of God's peace campaign.

Happy New Year! May the epiphany of Christ challenge you, embolden you, strengthen you and guide you. In the many blessed names of God. Amen.