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Pilgrim United Church of Christ
December 31, 2017: First Sunday After Christmas

Gospel text: [Matthew 2:1-12](#)

A week ago, we had a cuter and slightly more eclectic bunch leading worship: the usual Christmas pageant suspects -- Mary and Joseph, angels and shepherds, impeccably dressed magi -- joined by surprising biblical predecessors: Esther and Isaiah, Ruth and Naomi, Samuel and David... Adam and Eve *and Snake* (a part my six-year-old has waited his whole life to play). It was a longer and much holier processional than the one that followed later on Christmas Eve.

Thanks to the boundless creativity and questionable sanity of writer and director, Annie Galvez, this year's Christmas pageant featured quite the ensemble, drawing not only from gospel accounts of Jesus' birth, but Hebrew scriptures revealing a longer lineage of longing, an ancient and collective waiting for a messiah.

As our children and youth have taught us through Pilgrim pageants in recent past, there is no singular Christmas story -- there are Christmas *stories*, plural, told through multiple gospel narratives, with unique characters and elements. It is we re-tellers of the first Christmas [raise hand] who often collapse the distinct narratives into one frame. Luke's story of Jesus' birth is probably the one with which we are most familiar -- because it's the one Linus echoes to Charlie Brown. We have Luke to thank for the field -- and chancels and stages -- full of shepherds and chorus of angels.

Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus, retold by Kyle today, gives us some new characters, characters unique to Matthew's gospel: magi, or wise men, as some translations prefer. It's an unfamiliar word to us, *magi*. It sounds like a word with which we're more accustomed -- *magic* -- a common enough word for the Christmas season, though probably associated more often with Santa Claus than baby Jesus.

It's unclear exactly who these mystical figures "from the East" are... scholars suspect Persian prophets, astrological advisors, interpreters of dreams and omens... perhaps some combination of these enigmatic descriptions. Perhaps we are not supposed to understand exactly who these strange visitors from afar are. Perhaps they are meant to be as mysterious to us as they must have been to Mary.

The 13 century Persian poet and Muslim mystic Rumi wrote,

*Before these possessions you love slip away, say what
Mary said when she was*

surprised by Gabriel. I'll hide inside God. . .

*. . . Like the sun
coming up, or a rose as it
opens. She leaped, as her habit was, out of herself
into the divine presence.*

I imagine Rumi as one of the wise ones whirling from afar, crossing borders bearing gifts.

The mystery of Matthew's story invites such open imagining: a story of strangers following a stranger light, of prophecies and dreams, of magnificent gifts and *overwhelming joy*...

And they would have had to be, like the words of the [prophet Isaiah](#), *people walking in darkness* -- pilgrims traveling late at night -- for much of the long, uncertain journey, because darkness is necessary for noticing and following light.

This is the gospel reading that accompanies us each Epiphany, the twelfth and last day of the festival of Christmas. (Which actually makes it January 6th, but since none of you are coming to church on Friday, we're celebrating it today.) Epiphany comes from a Greek word meaning "manifestation" -- as in the manifestation, the revelation of God to the world in the Christ child. We celebrate Epiphany by remembering the magi's visit to the baby -- or, more likely, toddler -- Jesus.

Is it ironic that we get our Epiphany story from a narrative so full of intrigue? Matthew's telling of Jesus' birth is much darker than Luke's; Matthew's gospel is definitely the Tim Burton version of the Christmas story. He brings into the forefront a character left out of most of our Christmas pageants and Festivals of Carols and Lessons: the figure of Herod, the controlling, powerhungry king threatened by news of a savior that is not him.

Herod photobombs our precious pictures of Jesus in the manger, as Matthew reminds us that Jesus' birth was not received as good news by everyone -- certainly not the already powerful.

Matthew reminds us that the war on Christmas was not waged by outsiders from other cultures and traditions, but by insiders clinging to their disproportionate privilege.

And make no mistake about it, it was quite literally war on Christmas: when Herod realizes he has been tricked by the magi, who did not return to Herod to tell him where Jesus was but, as Matthew tells us, *left for their own country by another road*, Herod is furious. [He calls for the massacre of all little boys](#) in and around Bethlehem who are two years old and under, a horrific biblical event remembered as "The Slaughter of the Innocents."

So we tend to come to the second chapter of Matthew each Christmas a bit like a Starbucks menu: We'll take three wise men, topped with crowns, hold the Herod.

During an overwhelming and fragile holy-day season -- let's be honest, an overwhelming and fragile year, in many ways inexplicable and devastating -- can we not have a Christmas story without a Herod? Herod hits too close to home.

It's effortless, really, to point to political parallels today. We may not know what magi are, exactly, but we know too well what a tyrannical, manipulative, narcissistic, and destructive leader, surrounded by an equally self-serving and corrupt inner circle, is. That would have been such an easy sermon.

Yet Herod hits close to home in ways that may be even harder, because the *political is always personal*, to invert the second-wave feminist phrase.

Herod is not only in Jerusalem and D.C., the White House and the Hill. Herod is not only in the capital; Herod is wherever we go.

Truth be told, there is some of us in Herod; there is some of Herod in all of us.

I know, it's not the epiphany we want.

But as anyone who has had a baby, puppy, kitten, new spouse or roommate or job or major haircut knows, something new being born -- even something wanted and wonderful -- also means significant change, and inevitably some kind of loss -- of role or

routine, of identity or understanding, of the illusion of control... *what was* giving way to *what is*, making room for *what will be*.

And who here on the unknown threshold of what will be, has not -- with buckling knees and clinched fists -- clung to the well-worn ways of what was -- even if what will be is what we most need, is what we have been waiting and longing for all this time?

Birthing and becoming is never a painless process. And it always requires significant walking in the dark. Regardless of the pretty words we sing, birth never happens on a calm and silent night. *Holy*, yes. *Calm* and *silent*... not a chance.

It is easy to villify Herod, and, of course, his actions are horrendous, abhorant, evil. Like Rachel, and with all the mothers and fathers and siblings who lost -- who lose -- beloved, innocent ones, we weep. We raise our voices and bow our spirits in wailing and lamentation.

And may we also, like the magi, look closely and recognize our Herod figures, both outside of us and within us -- those deeply held impulses for security and control at all costs -- and courageously, creatively *resist* them.

When confronted with those Herod forces, personally and publically, may we also, like the magi, return -- *re-turn* -- *another* way... unafraid to walk far into the dark night, traveling in wonder, kneeling in awe, giving ourselves to being overwhelmed by joy...

During the Time with Children earlier this morning, we talked about the Epiphany tradition around the world of [chalking the door](#). Chalk marks are made on doorframes in memory of the magi's journey to the house where the by-then toddler Jesus must have been learning to walk. Marking the door with numbers of the upcoming year and the traditional initials given to the magi, houses are blessed in memory of their entrance and visit.

As we prepare to cross through another doorway tonight, as we stand on the threshold of a new year, I invite us in these moments to make similar markings. If you've not already used it to pass notes or spit out gum, there should be a small card inserted into your bulletin. I invite you to take that and a pencil or pen -- if you brought one in a bag or pocket, please use that so that others can use the pencils in the pews.

Or, if you prefer, close your eyes and envision.

Draw or imagine a doorway, as we stand in the threshold between this, almost last, year and a new year.

In this liminal space, *to what new thing or place do you feel God calling, drawing you to?*

What questions or fears do you have?

What deep hopes or dreams do you bring?

As you contemplate and hold these doorways, hopes, fears -- in your hands and in your hearts -- I offer a prayer over them and you:

*God of all our thresholds,
remind us that you are ever-present on both sides
and go with us in every crossing.
May we see, may we pay attention to, the sparks meant for us to follow.
May we not be afraid to walk in the dark along the way.
May we know in every single place,
whether we make too many steps or too few,
you are there, breathing into us life and love;
there is no direction you do not encompass.
In the way of the one born to help us see you, we pray.
Amen.*