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1.4.26

Epiphany Sunday

Magi from the East follow a star. Priests and scribes tell of the hope proclaimed by the prophet Isaiah. The Magi see the child Jesus. They offer gifts and kneel in reverence. There is so much promise and joy in this Epiphany Gospel reading.

But there is an ominous backdrop to this story. The presence of Herod the Great, the ruthless power-hungry king of Judea, permeates this text. Over the course of his reign he has his wife and two of his sons killed when he feels threatened by them. Anyone familiar with Herod could probably figure out that he is lying to the Magi. It is probably easy to interpret that for Herod, “so that I may also pay him homage,” really means “so that I may kill him.”

Sure enough, in the passage right after this Gospel reading, we hear that Herod orders the murders of all children under two in and near Bethlehem. Luckily by this time, Joseph and Mary have already taken Jesus and fled to safety in Egypt.

I have been sitting with the terror and violence surrounding this story all week. Two photos from the New York Times’ Year in Pictures have made today’s Gospel real and present to me. Among the year’s photos are two from Gaza. In one, a man holds his child after a bombing. Both are covered in dust. The father’s hand is bloodied. In the other photo, a woman holds her emaciated child. In each photo, there is a look of vigilance, worry, care, and weariness, on the face of the parent trying to keep their child safe, trying to keep their child alive. Both of these photos, taken in 2025, look like they could be Joseph or Mary with a young Jesus. [The photos are on the altar by Jesus in the manger, and you can look at them when you come up for communion, or after the service.]

Of course we know that in our time it is not only in Gaza that children’s lives are being threatened by violence and hunger. It is happening in Ukraine, in Sudan, and right here. This year, several churches put out nativity scenes where the Holy Family were in cages, or replaced by a sign saying “ICE was here,” or other statements about our present situation.

Some of us feel like such expressions are too much, that they drag politics into our faith, that they are inappropriate or over the top. Some feel the opposite, that these nativity scenes are empty gestures,

that they make us feel good, they make us feel we have done something, but they don't really change the harm that is happening.

The photos from Gaza, and the altered nativity scenes, they are disturbing, they are provoking. They cry to us, how do we protect the children being threatened today? How do we stand with immigrants and refugees here in the US and elsewhere?

Many of us have been wrestling with this question these days. And there are no simple answers. Everything I can think of to do to respond to the raids and deportations and charged rhetoric around immigration seems inadequate, empty, a drop in the bucket, performative or even offensive. The problem seems too big and too divisive, overwhelming and hopeless.

The conflicts and power struggles of Jesus' time were big and daunting too. We need to look for God's Word to us in today's Gospel story, with its hope and promise and joy. Let us enter the story and look to the Magi, and their actions.

The Magi. They follow a star. They go where it leads and stop where it directs them.

The Magi. They kneel before a child.

The Magi. They open their treasure chests and give gifts of great value.

The Magi give the Holy Family affirmation and blessings, to carry them through the frightening journey ahead. The Magi give Mary and Joseph riches, things of value that they could use to survive as refugees in Egypt.

The Magi leave by another road. They listen to their hearts, they listen to a dream, they do not obey the powerful ruler but resist.

The Magi. They observe. They follow. They listen. They give spiritual and material help. They resist.

They keep the child safe. They do not save all the children in Bethlehem. But they save the Savior Jesus.

The Magi. They cross borders. They travel for days without knowing exactly what they will find.

How do they do these things? They use their gifts, their knowledge of the stars.

How do they do these things? They consult others, even others outside their culture and religion.

How do they do these things? They travel together.

We assume there were three Magi, but actually the text just says there were three gifts. There could have been more than three following that star. But whether it was three, or thirty, they travel together, they observe and consult and marvel and give and resist in community.

Here is a big clue for us, St Martin's. Our main work as a church is to grow and build a community of prayer and discernment, a community of mutual care and love, a community of action. To pray together, to know and love each other, and then to go out and travel, marvel, give, and resist. This is no small project, St Martin's, it is uncomfortable, there is a constant tension.

Are we right or wrong, doing too little or too much, too radical or too safe, or all of these mistakes all at once?

We will not always know what to do, St Martin's, and we will not always get it right. But we need to keep trying, to keep praying, to keep living in this beautiful tension that is community. We are the Magi of today. We must go to the manger, we must look at the baby, and the babies of today's world. We must let ourselves be moved by what we see. We must look, pray, discuss, debate, consult, discern, together. We must look for a star. And when we see it, we must follow, marvel, give, and resist, together. We must work together to keep a child safe. That child is Jesus. Amen.