The Empire Strikes Back
A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC
Epiphany Sunday, January 5, 2020
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A long time ago, in an occupied land far away,

There was a powerful empire - Rome.
There was an arrogant ruler - Caesar Augustus.
There was an angry and insecure proxy king - Herod the Great.

And there were travelers, foreigners, outsiders, Magi,
on a quest, crossing deserts, following a star, seeking a king who would change everything. When they found him, they became part of his quest, the quest for good to rise up over evil, the power of love to triumph over the love of power.

The movie writes itself.

In a shiny palace the questing Magi talked to the wrong king. But the magi picked up on Herod’s nefarious ways - they knew as they proceeded to Jesus that he was a threat to Herod, that his life would be threatened by Herod, and they had a choice to make.

“With instruction to inform to Herod, the Magi go to visit Jesus, Mary and Joseph. But after being warned in a dream, that strange sleeping terrain of our deepest unconscious insights and spiritual epiphanies, the magi avoid Herod after their departure. They refuse to be complicit in the violence to come.

The text goes on, “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...”

We’ve got a mad, power hungry ruler killing all of the babies of the Hebrew people, but one special baby is going to be saved. Jesus is being set up in the framework of the Moses story, and the narrator is laying a foundation for the redemptive arc of the Exodus.”

As they listened to tales of Herod and Archelaus, proxy kings for the occupying Roman empire, Matthew’s earliest audience would have heard echoes of a previous empire. Their minds would have been drawn back to the enslavement of the Hebrew people in Egypt thousands of years before. In Herod’s massacre of the innocents they would have remembered that when the Hebrew people threatened Egypt’s power and control, Pharoah slaughtered their children.

The tactics of empire are rarely kind.

But they also would have remembered those who resisted Pharaoh: the midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, who saved Hebrew babies. The Hebrew sister, Miriam, who kept Moses safe by hiding him. Matthew’s audience would remember the good news, that the Empire may strike back, but it is possible to resist, and good can rise. Good will rise.

Matthew’s first audience would have heard this story...after Jesus’ death. The story of his birth was written down after his earthly ministry was over. They would have heard it after the Temple had fallen. In the wake of all that, Matthew chose to include these magi, and Jesus’ flight to Egypt. What was the good news there?

I think Matthew wanted his audience to identify with the wise ones from the east.

In Matthew’s gospel it was crucial that salvation was for all people, and that people from every race, culture and religious background could participate in the story of salvation.

The Magi were part of that point.

And perhaps Matthew wanted his audience to pick up the baton of the magi.

As Ched Myers puts it, “The best-laid royal plans fail because their assumed “accomplices” (the Hebrew midwives, the magoi) instead deceive their superiors in order to choose life. We never hear again of these mysterious heroes in the biblical story—yet upon their “bit parts” of costly conscience hangs the entire drama. Dare we assume that our own choices in a time of imperial violence, minor players though we be, are of any less consequence?”

The magi showed that it was possible to resist oppressive empires, in clever and meaningful ways.

Think of what they did as a little rebellion:

Acknowledging the real king was not the one Empire recognized.

Not telling the Empire where the unlikely savior was.

Giving to the child gold.

I have always wondered about this, thinking blankets and food might have been a better gift, but then it occurred to me:

Joseph and Mary would have traded gold for safety and shelter on their refugee journey, fleeing from Herod.

Perhaps Matthew was situating his audience within the cyclical pattern of history -
Empires strike back,
To hold power.

But breaking into history comes good news, new hope, a savior who was a vulnerable child, a savior who became a teacher and a healer, a savior who spoke for justice, a savior whom neither the Empire’s ways nor even death itself could stop.

In all this, Matthew was telling his audience, is telling us, we are part of the ongoing story of salvation. If the magi could do it, so can we.

As Wesley Rowell puts it, God is in it because we are in it.

This ancient pattern plays out over and over again in history, and today. We don’t know which empires will fall soon, but we can see good rising, we can see stars in the sky guiding us, and we can be part of it. God is in it, working for goodness, because we are in it.

A long time ago, in a country far away, a man led a movement against oppressive colonialism, using nonviolent civil disobedience. Good rose, and Gandhi’s methods inspired nonviolent resisters to the Nazis in World War II , and the Civil Rights movement in the US. Good rose.

Not so long ago, in a country far away, courageous folks followed a star toward equality, and apartheid ended. Good rose.

Empire may strike back but it does not always win.

Today there are massive struggles facing us.

The empire of guns allowed the modern massacre of innocents at Sandy Hook…. And voices for sensible gun regulation have been growing louder and stronger. Will good rise? I believe it will, someday - when enough people follow the star toward peace.

Vulnerable children at the border, separated from families and targeted by an empire seeking to hold on to power by declaring toddlers a danger to national security. Will good rise? I believe it will, someday - when enough people follow the star toward hospitality and kindness.

Antisemitism is on the rise and synagogues and rabbis homes are under attack. Somehow it is once again normal to attack people of other cultures and religions. In a country that claims religious freedom and interfaith tolerance as one of its great ideals, will we say no to antisemitism and bigotry? Will good rise? I believe it will, someday - when enough people follow the star toward respect and neighborliness.

Australia is burning. Greta Thunberg comes as a child, voicing climate justice, who threatens to overturn the greedy empire of fossil fuels and brings people from around the world to the cause, following a particular Swedish star. Will good rise? I believe it will, someday - when enough people follow the star toward care for God’s creation.

When innocents are massacred today, like Rachel, we weep.

Yet -
We are not powerless in this story, and this epic quest is not over. God is in it because we are in it.

Like those wise ones from foreign lands, we have ways to resist empire, and perhaps we have even more tools to protect the vulnerable, and follow the star that leads toward salvation. The star guides us to walk along side Joseph and Mary and Jesus, and the most vulnerable among us as they seek safety and shelter and justice and peace.
Let us be the wise ones of today, who will follow a star toward hope, peace, justice, and our true sovereign.

I’ll close with a prayer by Biblical scholar and theologian Walter Brueggemann:

Epiphany
On Epiphany day,
we are still the people walking.
We are still people in the dark,
and the darkness looms large around us,
beset as we are by fear,
anxiety,
brutality,
violence,
loss —
a dozen alienations that we cannot manage.
We are — we could be — people of your light.
So we pray for the light of your glorious presence
as we wait for your appearing;
we pray for the light of your wondrous grace
as we exhaust our coping capacity;
we pray for your gift of newness that
will override our weariness;
we pray that we may see and know and hear and trust
in your good rule.
That we may have energy, courage, and freedom to enact
your rule through the demands of this day.
We submit our day to you and to your rule, with deep joy and high hope. Amen.

Amen.

Benediction

Reebee: May God the creator, who delights in you,
Sarah: Jesus the Savior who is born for you,
Reebee: And the life giving Spirit who shines on in you
Sarah: Bless you and keep you
Reebee: In hope and in peace. Amen.

(from the ELCA)

<http://worshipwell.church/2016/01/21/communion-liturgy-for-epiphany/>

[http://www.seekerschurch.org/epiphany-2002-communion-liturgy-for-2002-ch...](http://www.seekerschurch.org/epiphany-2002-communion-liturgy-for-2002-christmastide/)

[https://www.firstchurchcambridge.org/sites/default/files/1.7.18%20Liturg...](https://www.firstchurchcambridge.org/sites/default/files/1.7.18%20Liturgy.pdf)

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Text: Matthew 2:1-18

1 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 2 asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." 3 When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; 4 and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5 They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 6 "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.' " 7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8 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." 9 When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 11 On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road. 13 Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." 14 Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, 15 and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son." 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 two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. 17 Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: 18 "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more." 19 When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, 20 "Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead." 21 Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. 22 But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. 23 There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, "He will be called a Nazorean."