

“The King Trembles”

A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church

Matthew 2:1-18

December 31, 2017 - First Sunday after Christmas/Epiphany

Tonight we ring in 2018 and bid farewell to 2017 in the year of our Lord Jesus Christ. My family’s plan, as late as September, was to celebrate with a trip to Puerto Rico to visit my mom’s family there, most of whom I’ve never met. Once Hurricane Maria hit, we decided to postpone our vacation and send funds for relief instead. Thank you, Edgewood, for doing more than your share to help.

Before the storm hit we were in deep negotiations about the timing of the trip. My mother, as some of you know, lives in New York, not completely convinced that I’m the pastor of this church. She seems to be operating under the theory that there’s a grand conspiracy to let me *think* I’m the pastor, but that clearly someone more responsible is running this ship. So I needed to remind her that, in fact, I would be working Christmas Eve. We all agreed that New Year’s Eve would be fun with our wacky and loud Puerto Rican family. I suggested we return on the fourth or fifth, so I’d have time to prepare for the following Sunday.

Mom gently pointed out, “Joe, I don’t know if you know this, but January 6th is a big deal in Puerto Rico. It’s called the Day of the Three Kings, and it’s actually bigger than Christmas!” I feigned astonishment, because we show love in my family by teasing, and then reminded her that not only could I speak at length (in Spanish!) about *El Día de los Tres Reyes* from working with Latin American families at Children’s of Alabama, but that this holiday was truly a holy-day and that the story was from the Bible. I believe my mom’s closing words as she laughed were “I’m gonna smack you!”

This weird little story from Matthew has become too common for us, thanks to pageants, hymns, and nativity scenes over the centuries that have prepared us with poetic license for the arrival of the visitors from the East. And so we aren’t confused, amused, or mesmerized by it. I think the first hearers of Matthew’s Gospel would have scrunched up their foreheads, rolled their eyes, nervously chuckled, and outright laughed at this story, right up until the massacre at the end. It’s bizarre.

We’ve got these total strangers — *magi*, it says — who come from beyond the horizon where dawn breaks and the first light of the sun arises. We don’t know how many of them there are or from where specifically they’ve come, but we know they’re stargazers from outside the faith who have come a long way. What are they doing in the Messiah’s origin story?

Anyway, they follow this star and we might think it’ll take them to Jesus and Mary and Joseph, but no, it takes them to Jerusalem to go see *boo! hiss!* King Herod. What? Why? And Herod points them in the right direction, and then the star takes over again (“*Recalculating!*”) and they find the child and these non-Jewish foreigners kneel and they present very strange gifts. An angel, presumably of our God, tells them to go home by a different road, and another angel visits Joseph in a dream and tells him to be very afraid and to run, and with that, the holy family is off to Egypt. Then Herod murders children and everyone weeps. Hey everyone, this is the Good News according to Matthew! Yea?

The weirdest little tales told in the tongue of theology tend to turn out to be even weirder than they appear, and to be much bigger stories than we thought. We don't know how many of these magi there are, but we know that there are two kings in this story. That's not news: you know there is the child king, the one called "King of the Jews" by the magi. He squirms in his mother's arms, and cries in the night, and his arrival is of cosmological importance, and not just for people of the covenant. As he coos and wiggles, astrologers a world away set out to find him.

This king is not the king we expect. The magi bring this king gold, but he will not receive esteemed visitors in an ornate palace. Instead he will see if he can score an invite to supper with those suffering the most and having the least. The magi bring him frankincense, but he will not be a priest who balances religiosity and politics. Instead, he will defy both empire and priesthood. He will not fight sin with aromatic prayers and burnt offerings, but will conquer it through forgiveness and a different sort of sacrifice. The magi bring him myrrh, and this will stick in our minds when he escapes Herod's slaughter in Bethlehem, knowing that this body will yet be anointed for burial.

And then there is the other king, Herod the Great, who spends this story trembling in fear and rage. He hears of the new born king from the magi and he is sore afraid. He does reconnaissance on the baby, finding out how old the kid must be. And he lies through his royal teeth to the magi, telling them to report back so he can go "pay homage." Herod the Great was culturally Greek and religiously Jewish, but he was politically a Roman and famously paranoid. When the magi don't return with the intel, he covers his bases by having all the boys two and under killed. *The Peace of Rome be with you.*

Here we see the work of the king who will always lash out with violence and force, because kings keep and acquire and control. It's what they do. This other king — the child, the anointed, the Christ — he will not keep and acquire and control. He will release and give away and liberate. He brings good news for all who wish to take part in God's radically inclusive love and grace. But this is not good news for those who desire power over relationship, and that includes Herod, and so he trembles.

This story is perfect for the Gospel of Matthew, and for a celebration called Epiphany, and for the turning of the year. Isaiah tells us, "Arise, shine, for your light has come," and that light comes from the East, from the dawn horizon, from far away, from an unexpected place. This light is not for hoarding, but for sharing. God will conspire with the odd and the broken and the peculiar and the foreign and those outside the faith. God will receive generosity from, and pour out grace upon, any who scan the sky in search of a place to take a knee and experience holy joy.

When this child grows, his ministry will be preceded by a loin-clothed, locust-eating desert preacher who will point to Jesus and say, "Hey, listen to that guy!" And listen they will, as he tells upside-down stories of the poor receiving and the rich being turned away and people will take him literally when he's speaking in metaphor and his own disciples will explain away his words when he is being dead serious.

It's foolishness, all of it. A child who terrifies a king. A savior who is a refugee, fleeing violent persecution. A Messiah who spends time talking about economic justice. A Christ who argues with priests. The son of God, in the hands of a thuggish Roman governor. The King of the Jews, nailed to a cross. A tomb that is empty and women telling what they've seen. Foolishness.

I have an Epiphany idea. Let's have an over-the-top foolish 2018. The calendar will help us. Ash Wednesday is on Valentine's Day this year and I've been working on my making little hearts with my thumb. Maundy Thursday is on Opening Day of the baseball season — which is wholly appropriate for a Mets fan. Easter is on April Fools' Day - no kidding! You *know* we will have fun with that. On tax day, we'll be in church, rendering unto God what is God's. Halloween will fall on a Wednesday night.

Let's lean hard into a year of foolishness in which strangers-to-us are welcomed and we wonder what gifts they bring. And the light that we receive is shared on all three hundred sixty-five days. Let's have a year in which we resist the plans for violence and destruction through creativity and conspiring with our God. Let 2018 be when we see salvation in ensuring the safety of refugees. And that sacrifice is holy when it protects the vulnerable. And that the last are first and death is a joke and the whole time we'll be following the light of the world, found in the Tumbleweed Junction of the Roman Empire.

It's foolishness, all of it. And it keeps the king up late into the night, trembling in his royal pajamas.
Amen.