

“Foreigners”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Matthew 2:1-18
January 6, 2019
Epiphany of the Lord

They were foreigners. Three of them. They had come from the East. They spoke with accents and an unfamiliar language. They were exotic. They were not like us. But they seemed to know something special. They seemed magical. Or maybe holy. From what we could understand, they had a weird story to tell.

The man had had a dream. Well, at least a couple of dreams. In his dreams, the man had met a heavenly messenger. First, he was told to marry the woman. Then, after the child came, in another dream, the man was told to flee. The king was out to get the child.

We didn't understand that part. Why would a king fear a child? Especially a king so powerful as Herod? They told us that coming to Egypt was strange for them, as their ancestors had escaped from here many, many generations ago. We don't know that story.

We didn't know what to make of them. But they certainly believed the life of the child was in danger. You could see in the eyes of both the man and the woman that they would do anything to protect the child. They would go anywhere, even to Egypt. They would take any risk. They would cross any border.

We didn't know what to make of them. But when children are in danger, we offer refuge. We offer sanctuary. We offer safety. We offer hospitality. It's the Egyptian way, I suppose.

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They had been following a star — they seemed to place great stock in stars. They had been to Jerusalem and asked about Jesus. They said he was born king of the Jews. That can't have gone over well. They had been swept in to see Herod, who wanted to know more about the star. He told them to return to tell what they'd found so that he could pay homage. But they weren't going to do that. Somehow, they'd been warned in a dream. They were going to take a different road home.

They seemed overcome with joy when they found the house. It was quite a sight. Let me tell you: joy transcends language and culture. They knelt down in front of the child and his mother. They produced treasure chests — gold, frankincense, myrrh! — it was incredible. They came all that way to offer a blessing from their own land — their own faith. They came all that way to bring gifts. It was quite a night.

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It's been said of Herod the Great that he was ethnically Greek, religiously Jewish, and culturally Roman. So, in a way, there were three of him, each exotic to the other. In his thirty-plus years as King

of Judea, he did a lot of big building projects, including a major renovation and expansion of the temple. Meanwhile, he murdered family members, had to keep Rome happy, and built himself a lavish seaside city.

In this story, he is paranoid and frightened. He inquires of the religious leaders and calls the Magi to him in secret. He tries to manipulate them, and is then infuriated when he realizes they're not coming back. He lashes out with terror. There's no record of this murder of innocents outside of Matthew — but Herod's was known for a reign of terror toward the end of his life. In any case, we see a man clinging to power through brutality.

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On this first Lord's Day of 2019, we hear from these characters how God works and how powers of destruction work to accomplish their plans.

The way of God will go a long way for a blessing, even when staying home would be easier and safer and much less interesting. The way of God crosses boundaries and borders — political and cultural and religious. The way of God is overwhelmed with joy. The way of God seeks and pays homage and brings gifts and offers hospitality both when it arrives and when it is visited.

And then there is the way of destruction, with its paranoia and fear and manipulation and willingness to sacrifice children's lives for political power.

We're about to have four ordinations here, and we'll install to active service two folks who were previously ordained. A big part of who we are as Presbyterians is explained in ordaining to church office: an engineer manager dude with a family way cooler than he is and an insurance agent animal lover who can't help but be helpful and a generous graphic designer who craves good music and a master gardener massage therapist nerd and a secretly hilarious nurse practitioner with a huge heart and a school librarian whose knowledge of books is only outpaced by her passion for learning.

Our traditions states clearly that God's call upon these folks to be leaders in Christ's church is in no way subordinate to the call to be a pastor with the title "reverend." And so, we ordain them. We ask them to lead us in the way of God with energy, intelligence, imagination and love as they serve as elders and deacons.

Together, we follow the star that leads us in such a way. May your 2019 be one of being overwhelmed with joy and offered comfort when you need it and of opportunities to give and receive gifts, and of crossing boundaries and welcoming the visitor and of seeking to find Christ, by day or by night. Amen.