

Auden, Magi, and the World we live in\*  
 The Rt. Rev. Dr. Bonnie A. Perry  
 January 7, 2023  
 St. Peter's, Detroit

May the God who creates us...  
 Please be seated.

The Magi, the wise ones from the East, the gentiles, the strangers, the ones who neither look like them, dress like them, or sound like them, appear in the seat of government, the throne room of power and ask, not for the current ruler, Herod, but for the new ruler, the one whose recent birth has been foretold in the stars.

They come to the ones, who have the most to lose, and ask,  
*"Where might that new ruler be? Pray tell. We've journeyed long and travelled far keeping watch of a brilliant, bright morning star."*

It's really, really hard, to hear this story, and not just go in our mind's eye to plaster figurines: little ones, big ones, broken ones, all in static poses, populating a tiny creche. It's hard not to hear about the three wise ones and get stuck on the statues, the manger scenes, and Christmas Pageants of our past. But when we limit scripture to pageant characters and charming Christmas carols, we can miss the invitation for a revolution. Stop for a moment and hear this story as an essay you may have read in the Atlantic, or an article in The Free Press, or an email from Heather Cox Richardson.

The author describes a visit from a foreign government: someplace maybe like: Malaysia, Nigeria, or perhaps the United Arab Emirates. The envoy arrives in D.C. and goes first to the State Department, then maybe the White House and says, at each place, we understand a new president is coming soon and we'd like to pay our respects.

The State Department and White House reply:  
 Yes, yes make an appointment and we'll work you into the president's schedule. You represent significant trading possibilities, and we'd like to increase our presence in your market. We can get you in.

To which the visitors from the East reply,  
*"We don't want to meet with your current president. We want to meet with the one who will replace him. Where can we find that person?"*

Imagine now the political pundit spree a report like that might inspire.

The naiveté, audacity and frankly, the stupidity of the visitors in Herod's court is

mostly lost on us, because not one of our manger scenes or Christmas pageants portrays the second event that happens after the magi leave Herod's court. We lovingly tell of the first event. The story of the wise ones finding the baby who has been foretold. There he is in backwater Bethlehem, as the prophet Micah promised, in a house under the star. They come, they see, they give thanks, offer some divinely inspired, well-intended gifts and then having been warned in a dream, not to go back to Herod, the *Wise ones* return home by another way. End of story.

Except it's not.

For power has been challenged. Might has been provoked. And Herod responds.

We are told the innocents are slaughtered, every male child in Bethlehem and the surrounding towns ages two or under, are put to death in an attempt to kill the Child who would vie for his throne. Herod cannot stomach a possible replacement. He holds his rule, by fear, force, and power.

In his 1942 poem, *For the Time Being*, W.H. Auden offers in language of his time why Herod says he must kill the Christ Child. If the Christ Child comes to the throne, then:

*Justice will be replaced by Pity  
as the cardinal human virtue,  
and all fear of retribution will vanish...  
**The New Aristocracy** will consist exclusively of  
hermits, bums, and permanent invalids. The Rough Diamond, the Consumptive  
Whore, the bandit who is good to his mother, the epileptic girl who has a way  
with animals will be the heroes and heroines of the New Age, when the general,  
the statesman, and the philosopher have become the butt of every farce and  
satire.*

Those who inhabit the margins will come to the center.

My friends, the Magi, are the opening salvo of Matthew's Gospel. A Gospel that makes it perfectly clear that Jesus of Nazareth's mission and ministry is all about, as theologian Anna Case-Winters says, confronting elite authorities, privileging the powerless, welcoming all from the margins: strangers, outsiders, refugees, women, men, children, (Belief Commentary: Matthew pp 30-31). Our God, came to the least and scared most—"the *best*."

As people of faith. As Christians doing our level best to embody Christ's hope for our world, what shall we in the dawn of 2024, what shall we do, to create the world that Christ's birth foretold?

Do we spend time studying the scriptures to undergird all of our actions. Do we

understand the theological call from Matthew's Gospel?

What shall we do as individuals and as communities of faith to embody the world that Herod so feared?

Do we speak truth to power and then back up our words with tangible actions? Tangible actions both small and great.

I wonder about caring for our environment, beginning with our personal practices? Paper or plastic, or reusable bags? How about our coffee hours? How much plastic and Styrofoam are we spewing into our landfills?

Are we here in Michigan driving or walking? Are we asking our elected officials to begin taking the question of mass transit seriously? Electric cars or fossil fuels? The glaciers are melting and the temperatures are rising, where are our solar panels?

In a world of wars have we offered our thoughts to our elected representatives?

How might we create space for all voices to be heard in our congregations? In the richest country in the world in our local schools do our young people have enough food over the weekends?

Are we as faith communities and as individuals involved in our local communities in such a way that our Gospel values, and our baptismal promises, to love our neighbors as ourselves and to respect the dignity of every human being, are being embodied?

Are we holding our elected officials accountable? Inviting, challenging, and supporting them in creating places for people on the margins to be heard and valued?

Are we people, who are doing our best to incarnate the upending, transforming, enlightening Gospel of Jesus Christ? Are we people seeking Christ? Are we Magi searching for his star? Are we willing to turn from Herod and walk another way?

These are some of my hopes and my prayers for us as individuals and congregations in this time of increasing light and visible epiphanies.

Amen.