

January 4, 2026

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Exodus 1:8-20 & Matthew 2: 11-15

Courageous Defiance

We heard the beginning of our story during the Children's Time and Time of Wonder this morning and we will pick off where we let off...Matthew 2: 11-15

And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, the magi left for their own country by another road.

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." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt 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." The Word of God for the people of God.

Thanks be to God.

"Don't make what someone told you into your narrative." Between Christmas and New Year's Eve, the NY Times ran a column by Melissa Kirsch on the best advice people had received during 2025. Kirsch had asked her readers last fall to share "the best wisdom received in the past 12 months." There are some really sound and provocative pieces of advice in the article and it is worth checking out. But the one I just shared has stuck with me this week because, while I very much appreciate its value in allowing each one of us to claim and affirm our own story, it is somewhat antithetical to the Christmas story we hear in scripture, especially our scripture today. "Don't make what someone told you into your narrative."¹ This is precisely what the Magi do and precisely what Joseph does. Now, to be fair, it is God sharing this message through an angel, at least to Joseph, so the rules may be a little different. Nonetheless, Jesus' narrative is shared both through his own actions and words, as well as the voices of others.

The first part of this narrative, the birth story, concludes this morning, as we have arrived at Epiphany Sunday – for Western Christians the end of the Christmas season. Technically tomorrow will be the Twelfth Day of Christmas and the Feast of the Epiphany celebrated on Tuesday, January 6. Now for some of you, it may feel like Christmas has been over for a while, all packed up and waiting for next year. Or it may feel like Christmas didn't really happen this year – or at least in the way you expected - because weather or illness impacted your plans. Epiphany Sunday gives us another moment to pause and reflect and to bring our gifts to the one whose birth we celebrate.

¹ Melissa Kirsch. Good Calls. *NY Times*. December 27, 2025. Online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/12/27/briefing/good-calls.html>

The festival of Epiphany originated in the Eastern branch of the church – and its celebration is actually older than the celebration of Christmas. It is mentioned as far back as 200 CE. by Clement of Alexander. In the Western Church Epiphany was adopted in the middle of the 4th century, around the same time the Christmas festival. It was considered a festival of great significance to the churches centered in Rome. The word epiphany in Greek means “manifestation,” and the festival commemorated the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles. The magi are seen as representative of all the non-Jewish people to whom Christ came.²

While Luke’s Gospel focuses on the shepherds living in the fields outside the town of Bethlehem and the elders Anna and Simeon living in the Temple in Jerusalem (the scripture we heard last week from J. Townley) as witnesses to the identity of Christ, the Gospel of Matthew invites us to notice that the foreign wise ones were some of the first to understand and believe that Jesus was the long-awaited messiah. They bring a message that God’s salvation extends beyond Jesus’ immediate Jewish community. The Gospel of Matthew ends with The Great Commission, with Jesus saying to the disciples: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” The Epiphany and The Great Commission frame the story of Jesus’ life. “Within these two bookends, Matthew’s message is clear: Not only supposed insiders, but also supposed outsiders are within the great circle of divine love.”³

A great circle of divine love that includes Joseph, the father who raised Jesus. When we tell the Christmas story, especially from the Gospel of Luke’s perspective, Joseph is a mostly on the outside looking in. In the 132 verses of the first two chapters of Luke, Joseph is mentioned by name only three times, once as the one to whom Mary was engaged, once in reference to journeying from Nazareth to Bethlehem for the census, and once as the shepherds found Mary and Joseph and the child lying in the manger. In contrast, in the Gospel of Matthew, it is to Joseph that an angel comes speaking words of promise about the son to be born. Just as Joseph had resolved to dismiss Mary as his intended wife, “an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” And it is to Joseph that an angel comes a second time, saying: “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.”

Neither of these are the narratives that Joseph expected based on the culture in which he was raised. Both of these actions required courage - more than courage – what a commentary on the scripture from the author of our seasonal liturgy from *Illustrated Ministry*

² L.W. Cowie and John Selwyn Gummer. *The Christian Calendar*. G & C Merriam Co., 1974 p 33-35.

³ *ibid*

call as *courageous defiance*. Joseph “protects Mary and Jesus not through violence or dominance, but by disrupting expectations, relocating his family, and resisting compliance with Herod’s regime.”⁴

Disrupting expectations and resisting compliance are also acts of courageous defiance we see in our Old Testament passage Jacob read from the beginning of Exodus. The story of the Hebrew midwives Shiphrah and Puah has a rich tradition in the Jewish Midrash, an ancient commentary on the Hebrew scriptures. One Midrash commentary about this story of the Hebrew midwives reminds the reader that the midwives “did not do as the king of Egypt had spoken to them; they let the boys live.” The Midrash then asks “...why it was necessary to write “they let the boys live,” if Scripture already stated that the midwives did not do the king of Egypt’s bidding? The rabbis answer the verses teach that not only did the midwives not kill the boys, but they also actively aided them to live. It explains that if the midwives saw poor women, they would go and collect food and water from the houses of wealthy women, which they gave to the poor ones, thus enabling them to provide for their children.”⁵

The Midrash praises Shiphrah and Puah for engaging in civil disobedience, defying the king and allowing the male Hebrew offspring to survive and even thrive. And it is not just the ancient Midrash, but also many contemporary commentators who have noted the irony of females outwitting the king, a king who believed that by killing off the male offspring, he would be decreasing the power of the Israelites. The king, who interestingly is not named although the Hebrew midwives are, lets his fear rule over logic, for he doesn’t seem to grasp the basic tenet of population control - fewer males are needed than females to sustain and grow the population. Likewise, in our text this morning, Herod lets his fear rule in his heart, fear of the birth of a king more powerful than he.

Herod’s fear is contrasted with Joseph’s courage – the courage to become an asylum seeker, crossing borders for the sake of his child’s safety, allowing the Divine to reorder his life. As a commentator has noted, “Joseph reminds us that to guard what is sacred often means saying no to empire and yes to risk. [Joseph’s] story invites us to take seriously our own dreams for the world, warnings, and responsibilities in a world still governed by fear.”⁶

“Don’t make what someone told you into your narrative.” The narrative of fear is rampant in our world today. Fear of what we might lose if others are invited in. Fear that we will fall behind or miss out because someone else gets a piece of the pie. Fear that allowing someone outside of our community in will have a negative impact on us. That is why each year we both the story that the Good News of Jesus’ birth came both to his immediate Jewish community and to those far outside of his Jewish heritage and locale. As I share in the words

⁴ Illustrated Ministry. The Will to Dream. *Commentary & Preaching Guide*. illustratedministry.com

⁵ Kadari, Tamar. “Shiphrah: Midrash and Aggadah.” Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women. 31

December 1999. Jewish Women’s Archive. <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/shiphrah-midrash-and-aggadah>.

⁶ Illustrated Ministry. The Will to Dream. *Commentary & Preaching Guide*. illustratedministry.com

of preparation in the bulletin, Roger Nelson reminds us, “As Matthew writes the nativity story, he’s not just writing about Jesus. He’s writing a multilayered reminder of how God works in and through history. Matthew is layering loss, longing, and liberation, and he places the coming of Jesus as the culmination of God’s action in human history. The birth of Jesus is part of a woven whole.”⁷

And that woven whole includes an early life as a refugee. We heard in our passage this morning that Mary, Joseph and Jesus remained in Egypt until the death of Herod. Jesus’ life as a refugee was woven into his identity. When Jesus teaches that the greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God with all your heart and the second is like it, to love your neighbor as yourself, he is teaching that as one who was received into a community as a foreigner, as an “other.” When Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan, answering the question put to him as to who is your neighbor, he is answering it as one whose early years were spent being cared for by those who treated him as a neighbor when his family fled to Egypt. When he opens the table to those for whom the religious authorities would restrict it, woven into Jesus’ invitation is the courageous defiance of his parents who brought him to a land where he would be safe from persecution. When the apostles spread the Good News of Jesus’ life and ministry, death and resurrection in towns far beyond Jerusalem, they too were not letting the narrative of a insular faith restrict their evangelism. They dreamed big, and their courageous defiance spread the message of God’s love and grace – the Word made flesh- throughout an empire where fear always seemed to have the upper hand.

The story of our faith is infused with acts of courageous defiance – defiance of pharaohs and kings, of the status quo, of exclusionary practices. And the story of our faith is infused with acts of welcome and justice as we work to make the dream of a world that resembles God’s kingdom more of a reality. In our final hymn this morning, we will sing about what that reality looked to the refugee family of Jesus. This is the work ahead of us, the ongoing work of Christmas. The work of inviting the “woven whole” of Christ into our lives. The Christ in swaddling cloths in a manger and the Christ who received precious gifts from the magi; the Christ who came to shepherds on the margins of society and the Christ who was recognized by wise ones from afar; the Christ who came from a Jewish community in the Galilee and the Christ who was a refugee in Egypt; the Christ whose message was met with open heart and the Christ whose message was met with hostility.

In a few minutes, we will be invited to dine at the table of grace with this “woven whole” of Christ, to begin the new year being fed by the bread of life and the cup of salvation. We will be invited to receive “a star word” to guide us we seek a deeper relationship with Christ, using this word in prayer and meditation, as an inspiration and a challenge, as an affirmation of a faith that asks of us curiosity and courage. May it be so. Amen.

⁷ Roger Nelson. In the Lectionary. December 28, Christmas 1A (Matthew 2:13-23). *Christian Century*. December 2025; online at <https://www.christiancentury.org/lectionary/december-28-christmas-1a-matthew-2-13-23>