

Where Is the Child?

Where is the child? This is the question that hovered over and around us as we discussed this passage on Wednesday at bible study. *Where is the child?* The magi come from far away and call on Herod, the person in charge—at least officially on paper, and their question sends him scurrying. This Herod is one of six different Herods mentioned in this gospel and in the book of Acts. They are all part of a corrupt family of puppet rulers beholden to the Roman Empire. As my friend and colleague Dr. Heather Shortlidge writes:

Pick a fight with Herod and you'll be taking on a well-entrenched family that's been around the block a time or two.

The one happening to be sitting pretty when the wise ones arrive is a strict Roman loyalist. He was known for mounting complicated building projects in order to keep the importance of this tiny Jewish kingdom in the rearview mirror of his Roman superiors. Moody, cruel, and renowned for his politics of murder, Herod did not relish threats to his shaky hold on power.¹

So the notion that a new king has been born, one worthy of his own star no less—is enough to send this Herod into a tizzy, and all of Jerusalem with him. Whether he wants to admit it out loud or not, Herod knows his power is passing and precarious. In the dim light of his desperate determination to hang on to the throne, he seems to recognize that the throne is not a fixed point and that his hold on the throne is not a permanent hold.

Where is the child? This seemingly innocuous question about an unknown infant is enough to send him over the edge.

The magi's question likely sounds a bit different in our ears, of course. For those of us who are just now getting around to tucking away our Christmas decorations, the location of the baby Jesus figure is clear—second box from the left in the hall closet on the third shelf. The child is tucked safely away, or at least the nativity figurine version is, or will be soon.

¹ In her paper for The Well in 2014

Where is the child? Herod does not answer the magi immediately. He does not look up or out at the star, as far as we know. He certainly does not venture outside the walls of his fortified palace to look for the child himself. Instead, he cocoons in his palace, circles the wagons and panics and scrambles and asks his in-house counsel where the expected and long longed-for Messiah is to be born. They point him to the little town of Bethlehem, the very town we sang about a few weeks ago, the town that lies still in a deep and dreamless sleep, the one where the hopes and fears of all the years find their match in one tiny child. Behind closed doors, Herod then directs the magi to go to Bethlehem and asks them to let him know when they confirm he is there so that Herod can go and honor him, too. And they go.

The wise ones do not plug the street address into Google maps. Even with Herod's navigational help, they look up and out and rely on that star. We do not get a peek into the magi's brains; no omniscient narrator tells us what they are thinking or their impressions of this frantic, panicked puppet king. No, the only insight we get into the magi's response is when they see the star stop and they are filled with joy, overwhelmed with joy in fact. That joy has nothing to do with Herod and everything to do with the child and the star that points the way. The star is not a fixed point. In that moment it hovers over a humble home, while its light extends far beyond that one fixed point. By the star's light, the magi find the destination they seek, the very One no fixed point can contain, the One who is indeed the Light of the world.

As you may know, my family and I made our annual trek back to Tennessee between Christmas Day and New Year's Day. After spending a few days with my husband Dave's family in Chattanooga, we headed up to Nashville where I was born and raised to visit with family there. I have not lived in Nashville full-time since I headed to seminary in 1992, and the landscape has changed dramatically. The landmarks I knew growing up have been razed for the most part. The home where I spent most of my childhood, where I played hide and seek and touch football with friends was torn down and replaced almost twenty years ago now. My grandparents' home is largely the same, as is my great-grandmother's—at least on the outside. I have my doubts that the pink-tiled bathroom with the gold accents that I adored as a child still remains untouched. And I understand. I currently live in an extensively renovated home on Spring Street, and I am eternally grateful for updated electrical and plumbing, as well as central air-conditioning. Moving forward requires tearing some things down

and peeling some layers away. I appreciate that, but change is still hard. Two restaurants where my parents and grandparents ate as students and took my brother for milkshakes and sandwiches and burgers near Vanderbilt when we were growing up have disappeared completely. The children's store where my mother bought my Florence Eiseman dresses and scratchy wool church coats with matching hats is now a rubble-filled parking lot.

Perhaps the most stunning changes of all revealed themselves at my home church. I had not worshiped there since before the pandemic, and the church has changed. Not in bad ways, necessarily. It's just different. The men and women who taught me Sunday school and coached my basketball team and served with me on a search committee have moved or aged in ways I had not noticed before. Some have died. The church building is different, too. The chancel steps where I knelt for my ordination and that I carefully climbed during our wedding and for our daughter's baptism have been reconfigured. The parlor where we gathered for my mother's visitation has been expanded. The space that contained the church library has been replaced with restrooms.

And I have changed, too. Not in bad ways, necessarily. I'm just different. It's hard, and it's ok. I am once again reminded that nothing and no one is created to be a fixed point. I still love worshiping in that sanctuary and I treasure the hugs from people who have loved me longer than I can remember. I love that they have welcomed new faces into the life and ministry of the congregation. I love that they have created new ways to care for one another and the world God so dearly loves. I love that they faithfully carve out a space of worship and wonder and light and love. And I love that they light up when they meet our daughter. Things do not need to stay exactly the same for that place and those people to reflect Christ's light to me. They are not a fixed point, nor am I. We were never intended to be.

Matthew tells us that the star stops over the house where the child is. That is how the magi know they are in the right spot at the right moment. The child will not stay there. The magi will not stay there either. In one dream God will tell Joseph to flee to Egypt to escape Herod's wrath. The magi will return to their home without retracing their steps to Jerusalem thanks to a holy dream of their own. The star will move on, too, of course. And yet the star's light was never contained in that one moment. A star's light never is. It shines even now, leading us out, pointing us forward, inviting us to seek out the child, the one true King, the Light of the world.

When the gray January days grow long, when budgets are tight and waistbands are tighter, when the powers that be spend their time squabbling and finger pointing rather than leading, listening, or serving, when diagnoses surprise us, when relationships unravel, when addictions persist, when depression and mental illness refuse to let go, the star's light can be hard to see, let alone trust. And so it may help to have a reminder to cling to, a touchstone of sorts, a tangible way to shift our vision away from the not-so-fixed points that fix little and refuse to stay where we want them to.

As you leave worship today, you are invited to pick up a star. Each star has a different word, a star word. This word is an invitation to remember the star and to look for the star's light in an often shadowy and uncertain world. As my colleague and friend Becca Messman writes: "Trust that you get the word you need. Let this word guide your prayers and hone your noticing of where and how God is leading you."² The stars are not magic, any more than that one over Bethlehem was all those years ago. Stars shine and invite us to look up and out. Stars point to the Light of the world, the one who promises to help us find our way.

Where is the child? He will soon flee to Egypt with his parents. We will meet him again at his baptism. He will call disciples and he will bless children. And he will confront the religious establishment and rattle the powers that be. He will not remain in Bethlehem, nor will he remain a child for long, and yet the question will still follow us: *Where is the child? Where is Jesus now?* May we help one another follow the star, and by the grace of God, may we find a way trust that God's light will continue to shine on us and through us as we make our way from the manger and out into God's beloved and battered world. And by the star's light may we continue to seek and serve the child, who is Emmanuel, God with us, no matter where, no matter what.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

² The Rev. Becca Gillespie Messman is senior pastor of Burke Presbyterian Church in Burke, VA and a member of the Well with me.