

 **Main Street**
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



Matthew 2:1-12, 13-23
“Two Roads To Bethlehem”

January 1, 2017
(The Epiphany/ U.M. Covenant Sunday)

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“Following Christ From City Center!”

IB1: MATTHEW 2:1-12, 13-23 "TWO ROADS TO BETHLEHEM"

No Numbers/Names/Origin/Transportation For Mysterious Visitors

1) 2:1-2 WISE MEN COME: KING, BEHOLD, EAST, STAR, WORSHIP. Son of David Motif
 5 Miles South Of Jerusalem
 1 Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of **HEROD THE KING**, //Lk. 1:5, Ruled 37-4B.C.
BEHOLD, wise men (magi) from the **EAST CAME TO JERUSALEM**, saying, *Magi = Ambiguous, Persian?*
 Pious Gentiles = Best Of Pagan Lore/ Religious Perception/ Science
 2 "Where is he who has been *born king of the Jews?* Herod's Title, Only Gentiles Use "King of Jews," 27:11, 29, 37
 God's For we have seen his **STAR** at its rising, T. Lev. 18:3, New Body, Same Gk. Word Means *East* (v.1) And *Rising* (v.2)
 People and have come to **WORSHIP** him." Worship (vv.2, 8, 11)/ Give Honor As God, Deity, Gentiles In Genealogy
 Come To Jerusalem (Jewish Center) From The East For More Information On Heavenly Omen

Herod Murdered Wife, 3 Sons, Contrast With Jesus' Kingship

2) 2:3-6 HEROD SUMMONS LEADERS: SCRIPTURE TELLS WHERE: TRUTH.

3 a When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, Special Revelation Clarifies General Revelation
 Herod Was Half-Jewish Edomite, Not Born King
 and all Jerusalem with him; All (2x), No Joy? Foreboding Sign Of Resistance, //21:10-11, 27:25
 4 and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, Unusual, Earlier Murder Of Sanhedrin
 5 he inquired of them **WHERE** the Christ (Messiah) was to be born Indifference Of Official Leaders
 They told him, Where? Magi More Interested Than Jewish Leaders
 John 7:42 On Bethlehem Tradition
 God's b "In Bethlehem of Judea; Unimportant Bethlehem Now Greatly Important
 Book for so it is written by the prophet, They Know But Do Not Seek/Indifferent
 6 'And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, Micah 5:1-2, Evokes David, Jesus' Resume
 are by no means least among the rulers of Judah, Scripture Re-written In Light Of Jesus!
 for from you shall come a ruler' They Confirm Jesus' Credentials
 'who will govern (shepherd) my people Israel.'" Last Line Modified from 2 Sam. 5:2, 1 Chron. 11:2
 Their Scriptural Knowledge Does Not Lead To Seeking!

2') 2:7-8 HEROD SUMMONS WISE MEN: STAR SAYS WHEN: FALSEHOOD.

7 a' Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly Secret Night Meeting, Herod Embodies Evil
 Ruthless Stealth Against Perceived Threat, //26:3-5
 8 and ascertained from them **WHAT TIME** the star appeared, Stars As Angelic Beings, Heavenly Host, When?
 and sent them to Bethlehem, saying,
 Satan's b' "Go and search diligently for the child, Toddler (*paidion*)
 Lie and when you have found him bring me word, Herod Ordered 6000 Jews Murdered At His Death
 Worship Him (2:2, 8, 11), Murder Children (2:13-23)
 When and Where Now Known, But Not The Who!

1') 2:9-12 WISE MEN DEPART: KING, BEHOLD, EAST, STAR, WORSHIP.

9a a When they had heard **THE KING** they went on their way; Seeking & Worship Is Proper Response To Jesus, 28:17
 Travel Report: Apparent Obedience
 b b and **BEHOLD**, the **STAR** which they had seen in the **EAST** went before them, Stars/Angels!, Ex. 14:19,23:20
 till it came to the place where the child was. Bar Cochba, "son of a star," 2nd Jewish War
 10 When they saw the star, "a star shall come forth out of Jacob," Num 24:17-19 LXX, Messiah
 they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy; Great Joy vs. Jerusalem Anxiety
 Worshipers: 2:2, 11;, 28:17,8:2, 9:18,14:33,15:25,20:20,26;6-13,28:9
 11a b' and going into the house (i.e. family), they saw the child with Mary his mother, Village House, 2:23
 and they fell down and **WORSHIPED** him. //14:33, 28:9 Worship: Face To Ground (1)
 b God's Then opening their treasures, Offering (2)
 Son they offered him gifts: Suggests Arabian Desert
 gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Ps. 72:10-11 (nations/kings), Is. 2:1-4, 43:5-10, 60:3-6 (1st 2 gifts); Mic. 4:1
 Myrrh Was Embalming Spice: Foreshadows Death
 12 a' And being warned in a dream not to return to **HEROD**, Sleep As Place Of Revelation, 1:20, 2:13,19
 they **DEPARTED** to their own country another way. Travel Report: Higher Obedience

Parallels between the Moses/Pharaoh and the Jesus/Herod stories include: 1) Murderer Pharaoh Decrees Death Of Male Children (Ex. 1:16, 22), 2) Moses Saved (Ex. 2:1-10), 3) Moses Flees (Ex. 2:15), 4) Moses Returns After Pharaoh's Death (Ex. 2:23, 4:19). For further elaboration of the Moses story in Judaism, see pseudo-Philo's *Biblical Antiquities* 9:9-15; Josephus *Antiquities* 2:205-37.

MATTHEW 2:13-23

1) vv. 13-15 ANGELOPHANY TO JOSEPH: FLEE TO EGYPT.	References/Allusions
a) v.13 Dream And Angel. Now when they (the magi) had departed, BEHOLD , an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph IN A DREAM and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother and flee to Egypt, and remain there till I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child to destroy him."	Travel//Sacred Geography: Bethlehem/Jerusalem/Egypt/Israel/Nazareth Child With Royal Gifts Must Flee For His Life 2:12, Magi Saved By Revelation 1:20, 2:19, Holy Family Saved By Revelation Further Directions Later, Indefinite Time 10:23, 24:16 Escape = Faithful Response, Ex. 2:15 Command + Reason, Ruled By Rome Since 30B.C., Outside Herod's Jurisdiction Flight Of Church, 10:23, 24:16 I Kings 11:40, Jer. 26:2, Land Of Refuge/ Exodus March/April 4 B.C., Jewish Refugees On The Run Flight As Obedience To God, Fight Another Day
b) vv.14-15a Joseph's Obedience. And he rose and took the child and his mother by night, and departed to Egypt, and remained there till the DEATH OF HEROD	Fulfillment Citations Freeze Action/ Explain Significance Emphasizes Divine Guidance, <i>Sensus Plenior</i> = Fuller Sense Highpoint! Hosea 11:1 (Prophets), Fulfilled in vv.19-23, New Exodus Citations Show Jesus Fulfills Ancient Plans, God In Control Of His Life
c) v.15b Fulfillment Citation: Hosea 11:1. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt have I CALLED MY SON ."	

Each Major Move Echoes Scripture, Interprets Events

2) vv. 16-18 THE WRATH OF HEROD AND SLAUGHTER OF THE INNOCENTS.

Radical Evil Is Present But Does Not Frustrate God's Plan

a) v.16a Setting After Divine Guidance.

Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men,
was in a furious rage,

No Peaceful, Sentimental Christmas Scene

They Escaped! Actually Tricked By God

Herod Kills Innocent To Save Himself, Opposite Of Jesus

Jesus Is A Real Threat, Born With Price On His Head

b) v.16b Herod's Evil Actions: Preserve His Rule At All Costs.

and he sent and killed *all* the male children in Bethlehem,
and in all that region who were two years old or under,
according to the time which he had ascertained from the wise men.

Specific Number, Age, Location
Ex. 1:22, Likely Only A Few, Died In Jesus' Place!

//Testament of Moses 6:2-7 On Murder

Perversion, Like Pharaoh, Exodus 1:15-22

God Does Not Interrupt All Evil; Gives A Measure Of Freedom

c) vv.17-18 Fulfillment Citation: Jer. 31:15.

Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah,
"A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled, because they were no more."

God Hears The Grieving, Does Not Will Evil

//27:9, Passive Voice, Recorded But Not Approved

God Hears, No *In order that...*, Sounds Of Grief Over Personal Evil

Ramah = Mourning Place Of Jewish Exile To Babylon

Matriarch Of Israel (Jacob's Wife), Mothers Wailing

No Easy Comfort, Jer. 31:15 (Prophets)

Jesus (New Moses/Israel) Recapitulates Events In Jewish History

1') vv.19-23 ANGELOPHANY TO JOSEPH: RETURN FROM EGYPT.

God Rescues His Son *From* Death, Later *Through* Death, Jesus Is Where Pain Is

God Does Not Will Sin/Evil, But Incorporates It Into Providence

a) v.19-20 Dream And Angel.

But when **HEROD DIED**,

Jesus Born 6-7B.C., On The Gory Details: Josephus *Antiquities* 17.6.5 Para. 168-171

BEHOLD, an angel of the Lord appeared **IN A DREAM** to Joseph in Egypt, saying,

Habitual Form Of Joseph's Guidance

"Rise, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel,
for those who sought the child's life are dead."

Death Ends Capacity For Evil, Ex. 4:19, Flees From Land Of Bondage!

Other World Is Fully Aware Of This One, Deeply Engaged

b) vv.21-22 Joseph's Obedience And Additional Dream.

And he rose and took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel.

J.W. 2:1-13 Archelaus Orders Massacred

But when he heard that "Archelaus reigns over Judea in place of his father Herod,"

Ethnarch Over Judea, Samaria, Iturea

he was afraid to go there,

Fear As Useful Indicator, Till 6A.D.; Replaced by Roman Appointee

and being warned **IN A DREAM**, he withdrew to the district of Galilee.

Place Of Gentiles, Ruled By Herod Antipas (Killed John)

Jesus Homeplace Is By Divine Design

c) v.23 Fulfillment Citation: Judges 13:5-7 (nazir)?, Isaiah 4:3 (Heb. neser) ?

And he went and dwelt in a city called Nazareth,
that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled,

4:13, John 1:46, 7:41 On Insignificance Of Nazareth/Galilee

Nazareth Is Never Mentioned In Old Testament

"He shall be **CALLED A NAZOREAN**."

Hick Town, Judges 13:5-7 (Samson/ holy from womb), Isaiah 4:3, 11:1, ? Acts 24:5

Focus On Messianic Topography, *Where* Question Of 2:2, 4, Full Of Place Names, Historical Characters

TWO ROADS TO BETHLEHEM

“...and they fell down and worshiped him.”

The end of the finding, the beginning of the serving.

M A T T H E W 2 : 1 1

During the 2008 presidential race, Senator John McCain was asked by *Time* magazine to share his personal journey of faith. And his words were:

“When I was a prisoner in North Vietnam, my arms were tied behind my back and the rope looped around my neck and ankles so my head was pulled down between my knees. I was often left like that throughout the night. One night a guard came in my cell. He put his finger to his lips signaling quiet, then loosened the ropes. The next morning, he tightened the ropes, never saying a word.

A month or so later, on Christmas Day, I was standing in the courtyard when the same guard approached. He stood silently next to me. He used his sandaled foot to draw a cross in the dirt. We stood wordlessly looking at the cross, remembering the light of Christmas, even in the darkness of a prison camp.”¹

McCain no doubt prayed for release, and finally it came as he and others were flown to Clark Field in the Philippines. But what God sent was not immediate relief, but a sign of hope and a new view of at least one of his captors, after which he might have wondered, “Are there more?”

The most emotionally compelling charge against the way Christians read the world is the persistent reality of evil. “How could *your* God,” they say in the second person accusative, “the one *you* claim is so good and powerful, allow

¹ Edited, John McCain, "A Light amid the Darkness," *Time*, 8-18-08, 40.

such horrors and cruelties to continue?” It’s an emotionally powerful argument. Christian philosophers counter with the logic that the fact of evil is in fact an argument for God. And it goes something like this. We all make objective moral judgments, that some things are bad regardless of anyone’s personal taste or preferences; it’s not all relative. James Anderson uses this example:

“... the discovery of antibiotics was a good thing, while the Holocaust was a bad thing— indeed a supremely evil thing, and no right thinking person believes these value judgments are merely matters of personal taste and preferences. An objective value judgment presupposes some standard of goodness by which things can be judged. That standard has to be independent of us... it must represent pure goodness, otherwise it could not serve as the final standard. The worldview that makes the best sense of objective value judgments is the Christian world view with a perfectly good God who exists independently of the universe.”²

Put in formal terms, the same argument goes like this:

- Premise 1: *If God does not exist, objective moral values and duties do not exist.*
- Premise 2: *Objective moral values and duties exist.*
- Conclusion: *Therefore, God exists.*³

Now, valid as the argument is, it doesn’t answer the charge, which is not so much about God’s existence, even his power or goodness, but why such a

² Adapted from James Anderson, *Why Should I Believe Christianity?* (Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2016), “God and Values,” 106-110.

³ William Lane Craig, *On Guard: Defending Your Faith with Reason and Passion* (Colorado Springs, CO: David. C. Cook, 2010), Chap. 6, “Can We Be Good Without God?” 127-146. See also Tim Keller, *Making Sense of God* (New York, NY: Viking, 2016), Chap. 9, “The Problem of Morals, 176-192; Douglas Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics* (Downer’s Grove, ILL: IVP, 2011), Chapter 15, “The Moral Argument for God,” 330-363.

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Being is not doing more now to stop cruelty and evil in our world. The screams of pain and loss have never ended. And if you listen, you can hear them; sometimes they are your own. Jesus listened; he still listens, and so must we, however uncomfortable the stories made us. The church is the place you don't have to pay a hundred dollars an hour to find a listening ear. If I did not know he was near as the crucified and risen one, I could not keep listening.

Typically, behind the intensity of the challenge are incidents where they felt God did not show up despite their prayers, and such stories need to be treated with care because they change life forever: a rape, a wreck, a crime, a child with cancer, living in war zone, cruelty in a home that was supposed to be safe. They're often mad with the God they believe in, or used to believe in before the bad stuff came and crushed them. Where was God? And if you listen, a bridge of trust is built, which is— I think— a sign God is already at work.

Now when you ask what they want God to do, the simple answer is, “Stop it and fix it.”

“And how might that happen?”

“Well,” they fumble, “he could just come down and fix it.”

“And he will,” I reply, “we pray for it every Sunday in a scripted prayer Jesus gave so we leave out nothing important, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, down here on battlefield earth as in the present perfections of heaven above where the problems aren't. And until that great event we need daily bread and constant forgiveness and protection from the Evil One. Amen”

“But why wait so long?”

“What if,” I ask, “if God is patiently giving people time to change? And what if the news of Jesus has not yet found its way within the earshot of every person? And what if part of following is enduring difficulty in order to learn compassion and develop fortitude? And what if we are to press back against the evil with the forces of love and justice? And what if this is the drama of all history and of every single life, not a vacation but a deployment near the front lines where the fire is live and the casualties many? And then, in God's time, history as we've known it comes to a sudden close. The truth will out and all scores settled at the boundary between this and the world to come, which is creation fully healed and restored, and us along with it.”

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“But why not deal with all the bad people now?”

“Well, if the line between good and evil does not run between me and another person but down the center of every heart, how could God do that without doing us all in?⁴ Have you looked in your heart lately?”

“Well then,” some ask, “Is God just sitting up there, doing nothing, watching us live and die in the mess?”

“No, our sacred stories teach that the God of Jesus is quite active at ground level, just not in flashy ways to give immediately relief and satisfying answers. God works the seams and the cracks in ways we miss. One day it will all be clear, but for now most divine work is by preservation and subterfuge, by indirection and inflection, by out waiting and outsmarting foes. It’s *divine providence*, and once you’ve seen it, you’ll see more and have hope.”

“Can you tell me one of the stories?”

“Yes I can.”

Long ago in a land far away, a Jewish boy named Jesus was born under the rule of a wicked king. King Herod was a builder of great monuments and a killer of family members whenever they stood in his way, a truly nasty man.

One day without warning some sky scientists from Persia showed up asking awkward questions about a new king with full and not fake credentials. In that day— you must understand— stars were not seen as impersonal planets but as *the heavenly host*, angels sparkling across the night sky.⁵ They’d seen a new one rise in the East, so they took the hint and set out West on a road trip with a question, “Where is the Jewish king to be born?”

⁴ A paraphrase of Alexander Solzhenitsyn, “If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?” (www.goodreads.com).

⁵ The key article is Dale C. Allison, “What was the Star that Guided the Magi?” *Bible Review*, December 1993, 20-24.

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The specialists in Jerusalem had an answer from the prophet Micah, “In Bethlehem.” So the conniving king, sensing an opportunity, made an offer, “You find him, and I’ll come join you in worship.” Into his hands they had naively fallen, and the Evil One behind him was licking his chops for the kill.

So the magi went the six miles, the light leading them to the very spot. And there they found the child with his mother. They prostrated themselves face down and presented gifts to honor his worth in *worthship*, in *worship* to use the shortened English term. Then, having first followed the call of the heavenly light, the same one who posted the GPS angel sent a convincing dream, and they slipped out of Herod’s sight by another route. He’d been fooled, out maneuvered by Providence.

In our world as it now is, good and evil are so tightly woven they cannot be cleanly and neatly separated. To seek the first is often to stir up the second, as here. The first Gentiles follow God’s guidance to the cradle of the king, and— in the process— serve as unknowing scouts for a death squad. Only God can do the separating of good and evil, and then only at the end when all is made public. Had the angel not been sent and the magi not made curious, Herod would not have known where to send his troopers to kill all the males under two to give himself a safety margin, so did God cause it? No, in the web of circumstances and of free decisions, of God’s will interacting with both the curious magi and a mad king, Herod did it, and that is where the blame lies.

Jesus lived because his father received a warning in a dream, “Joseph, flee to Egypt with your family. Get off Herod’s turf; wait until he’s dead to come home. More information later.” So he did, and in hindsight it was seen as a new Exodus as echoed in Hosea, “Out of Egypt have I called my son.” But Gentile outsiders— our forebears— have now come to worship Jesus, and that apparently was worth the risk of collateral damage. God does not control the efforts of those who oppose him. Evil will be done in, but for now it has to be worked around and outlasted.

Herod was not pleased at being made fool of, so he sent soldiers to *O little town of Bethlehem* to kill all within a span of two years who might one day grow up to challenge the family dynasty. Odd, isn’t it, that children died for Jesus

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long before he died for us? They were received into heaven, but Jesus was raised from the dead. And while our God did not cause this event or will it by some eternal decree so that it had to be, still it echoes an event in the days of Jeremiah: Rachel weeping and weeping because they were no more.

Evil and misguided men and women, along with their fateful decisions, are not prevented but ripple out over time with new ones always in the wings. They die, as did Herod and Hitler and Sadaam Hussein, and others soon take their places. History has never been without its monsters, never will be till the end, and new ones are today in formation. All are weak and frail and rebellious sinners according to our teaching, and we all remain capable of wickedness and evil all our days– including Christians, including pastors– but some give themselves over to its pursuit with a terrible vengeance and leave a vast wreckage behind. They find good boring and evil magnetic, demonstrating how close they’ve come to Satan’s takeover of the self. You never want to surrender to the spiritual and moral darkness that always lurks around your life looking for an opening.⁶ To fight and resist, as our baptismal vows require, is part of following Jesus, and it is fighting under his banner that keeps us alert.

We all have power to effect one another, and were God to withdraw that web of interaction and consequence, our choices would have no moral weight; we would cease as image bearers, as true agents. The boys of Bethlehem were not saved; only one escaped and later returned, and that is God’s providence. Hidden, selective, effective, purposeful. All were loved, but only one was protected; only one was strictly necessary. I am of great value to God, as are you, but not strictly necessary. If I die tomorrow, the kingdom goes on.

In 4B.C. Herod died, and Joseph received the promised notification, “You may now leave; the evil that was Herod is now dead with him. His son King Archelaus now has to be worked abound, so avoid the road through Judea.” Even the village they came home to finds an echo in Scripture, “He shall be called a Nazorean.” Matthew insists that the details of Jesus’ early life are ordered by God; he is preserved and protected by meticulous and detailed

⁶ 1 Peter 5:9-11.

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providence with his charismatic father Joseph as the recipient of three revelatory dreams. In Mary he was virginally conceived, and by Joseph physically preserved, thus God honors both his parents. Joseph is not an extra; he is crucial, but for a different reason.

There are two paths to Bethlehem. Wise men one day, soldiers the next, to one a joy, to others a threat. Scripture is honest to record the light and shadow sides of Christmas. A child with his mother and father headed for safety in Egypt and a fresh little plot graves outside the village. This is our world. So beware of those who kill the innocent, whether as tyrants, or under modern banner of choice. Herod did it for power politics, we mostly— though not always— for convenience. It got in the way of his dynasty; it gets in the way of our pleasures and careers. It’s interesting to go back and read some of the debates before and after *Roe v. Wade*. Everyone thought the procedure would be relatively rare. No saw what was coming, birth control after the fact by millions.

Yes I’m bothered by the possible double digits of the Bethlehem massacre, how it revealed and further hardened Herod’s character. How much more the fifty five million we’ve endured, mostly with the church sitting quietly as accomplices and giving moral and theological cover until just recently when as United Methodists we finally repented and by General Conference action in the Spring commanded our agencies to officially withdraw from the RCAR, the Religious Coalition For Abortion Rights of which we were a founding member.⁷

To me, though a long time coming, it is a sign of hope, because if we as a church can publicly repent of our corporate sins and distance ourselves from the anti-life forces of the culture— which we have finally done, at least on this point— God may yet use us again to, as in former days, “reform the nation and

⁷ “General Conference votes to withdraw from Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice,” *UM Reporter*, May 19, 2016, unitedmethodistreporter.com/2016/05/19/general-conference-votes-to-withdraw-from-religious-coalition-for-reproductive-choice.

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spread Scriptural holiness across the land.”⁸ It is good for a church to have a reverse gear, and we seem to have found it after long neglect. And what will God say when some men and women shout back, “It was our right! The courts told us so!”

“Yes,” the reply will come, “And this is a yet higher Supreme Court.”

There is mercy for the likes of all us compromised Christians in a compromised land. When you say Yes to Jesus and seek to follow him with others in our dangerous, treacherous world, you will be drawn into the deep workings of divine providence, and there is no safer place to live than this.

Today, as the first Sunday of a new year, is the day we renew our covenant with our Great and Good and Holy and Fearsome and Loving God. Draw near with trembling to meet Jesus where he promises to be found, and that is at his table. And if there is something wicked or evil or violent or cruel or criminal or just plain sinful that you have done and never dealt with, bring the shame of it and the guilt of it and the torment of it to him. Let him take it from you, forgive you, and set you free to follow him without fear of judgment. It’s what he does best. It’s why he came, to heal our relationship with God.

⁸ “Minutes of Several Conversations” Q.3, in *The Works of John Wesley* [vol. 8; ed. T. Jackson; Baker, 1978] 299).
