

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Magi: Get up and Go”

Rev. Mark Lampley

Matthew 2:12-23 and Isaiah 41:8-10

December 31, 2023

The greater context of our December readings from Matthew 2 includes some familiar things. When the magi/wisemen saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy! They knelt down, paid the Christ-child homage and gave wonderful gifts.

Today’s New Testament lesser-known reading is thematically difficult to swallow. While there’s some pleasantries leading up to this, there’s challenging topics ahead: exile, genocide, and dodging a murderer. Matthew 2:12-23

And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they 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.”

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the magi. Then what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:

“A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.”

When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child’s life are dead.” Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of

Galilee. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, "He will be called a Nazarene."

I admit it. I have a mild fear that gets the best of me sometimes. Recently, there in our kitchen, my family was gently teasing me for being so afraid of someone hacking me online. I get a suspicious text or email regarding some account of ours, possibly being signed into theoretically from some foreign continent and usually in the middle of the night. I go into a real panic! I urgently send a message out... hastily to all the family members. "I think our password for such-&-such of has been compromised." There is reasonable concern for identity theft, don't get me wrong, but I'm immediately SO annoyed and fearful at the evils of these unknown dark-web thefts! They can steal people's personal information and passwords for nefarious purposes. I'm afraid it'll mushroom into more accounts being hacked into. Meg and Luke, our generation Z children, laugh at me for taking it a little too far. For being terrified! It may be true, but I'm probably still going to hold onto a healthy bit of skepticism with such notifications. Truth is, we all have various degrees of fear about a lot of different things.

We just visited my mother-in-law in Kentucky for Christmas. She's made it clear of her phobia of birds. Karen and I, (surely like every parent), fear something going bad for our children. My most frightening time since living in Knoxville was when I caught wind there was gunfire heard at Luke's high school while he was there. My heart stopped. My feet didn't! I literally ran to my car, drove too quickly in that direction only to find out it was the neighborhood next to his school, and nobody was even hurt there.

I know several of you, in our church family, fear any number of things, an illness coming on or getting worse, or a parent falling (which may turn into something grandeur). Some fear the unknown future because: you're not sure where you'll be living in a few months or years, how to pay for Christmas, a party, a wedding, university expenses, or how you'll lose weight after putting on a few pounds this season. Then, there are those, beyond our church family, who may feel lost, alone, or misunderstood. We have fears and trembling in our country, in the Holy Land, in Guatemala, and other parts of the world. Obviously, all people of various races and religions fear. Sociologist and psychologist would tell us that the core emotion of fear motivates most of our major decisions and lots of our minor ones. It's no wonder that the Bible speaks of fear hundreds of times. God wired our brains to experience fear, though. There is a reason and purpose for our fear as we respond to triggering stimuli. When God says, "Do not fear" he is not commanding us to shut off a part of our brain. His model [disciple] isn't an emotionless and stoic robot. The real issue God wants us to wrestle with is where we go when we fear. Where do we go with your fears? How do we deal with them? Simply put, God wants us to come to him. When

we “fear” in the presence of God, God help us take the next step of faith even in the midst of our fear! Instead of freeze up, get paralyzed without any decision, or flee, we are to offer our fear up in prayer to the Lord. Open up to what God does in the middle of our fear.

In today’s New Testament passage, a lot has to do with fear, even though it’s only overtly mentioned once. The magi, who gave gold, frankincense and myrrh, had a dream. They reroute themselves as they head home for fear of Herod. An angel then appears to Joseph in a dream giving an urgent message to immediately flee for another country because their newborn child was being sought after to be killed! A parent’s nightmare! Herod feared losing his status as king. And after Herod dies, Joseph was afraid because Herod’s ruthless son was ruling.

Hopefully, we can see here how God knows what we’re dealing with. God comes to us in our fear. God reassures us, and sends us.

Jesus, is born into a setting of fear-filled people. Our Lord comes into a context of the harsh reality of infanticide. Jesus isn’t just born in a picturesque lowly stable with worshipping magi and animals frozen in time. No, Jesus is born into the realities and troubles of our plight. God’s only begotten son, remains a Savior in our troubling situations of brokenness, relationships not quit repaired, our chronic pains, of our fears that still haunt now that the warm sentimental Christmas holiday has passed.

The good news we’ve been singing “go tell it on the mountain” is still a message of hope needing to be heard. Emmanuel, God with us, is still powerfully true. It can still surprise us!

Jesus is born into whatever our circumstance. Were you treated poorly as a child? Did you move around a lot growing up? Did you parents worry about your well-being? Did you have others who bullied you as a teen, or even today as an adult? Did you grow up as a step-child?

Jesus not only personally empathizes, but also comes into that as the agent of change. As Lord over all, He speaks into that past and present saying “fear not.” Jesus addressed fears by his very presence and spoke into young Mary and Joseph’s life first, but it didn’t stop there. He kept speaking peace, in words and deeds, his whole life long.

Malcolm King is one of our church family who ministers to me, often. One way he helped recently was with something from his weekly inspirational text messages. In part, he said, “Christmas is not just a reminder of a past event. It is a reminder that there is more to come. The birth of our Lord and King was just the beginning. The coming of his rule and the establishment of his kingdom is still in our future.

As we take stock of the world around us, it is easy to think that the future will be less promising than we hope. One moment we are like the shepherds, rejoicing on the way as they go back to work. But in the next, we realize that there are too many like King Herod who would destroy our desire for peace and prosperity for all. It is tempting to give way to the darkness. But. Hold on. Stick to the story we know. God reminds us that all will be well in the fullness of His time, not ours. God sent His son as a gift to us, to remind us that the love and peace of God is ours for the living of these days. "Fear not! The Lord is with us!"

Maybe you are in fear today. Maybe you're afraid of what 2024 holds. Maybe you, underneath, would be so very liberated to open up, let your fear run out, be utterly vulnerable with your deepest challenge. You can! Tell the Christ-child all you need to. Release your grip. Behind the façade, you know it's eating you. Let it go, tell it to Lord, who already knows what you're afraid of. Let His presence and peace replace your fear. He wants to comfort you. In fact, God plans to help us to help another. Let's not stop at abstinence of fear.

Hear Isaiah's powerful words, again, "I have called from its farthest corners, saying 'You are my servant; I have chosen you...; do not fear, for I am with you; do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you; I will help you; I will uphold you.'"

We're called from fear to be a servant. God chose us to come to him in fear so that we can be a servant vessel for someone else, like Christ did. We're to "Get up and go" with assurance God is with us and share the peace!

Maybe in a still, small voice, even today, we can be reassured and sent for others. Maybe God can even help me with my little fear of cyber password hackers, and use me to help someone else. May it be so for me and you!