

They Asked the King Where's the King

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[0 : 00] This is a litany for survival by Audrey Lord. For those of us who live at the shoreline, standing upon the constant edges of decision, crucial! and alone. For those of us who cannot indulge the passing dreams of choice, who love in doorways coming and going in the hours between dawns, looking inward and outward at once, before and after, seeking a now that can breed futures like bread in our children's mouths so their dreams will not reflect the death of ours.

For those of us who were imprinted with fear like a faint line in the center of our foreheads, learning to be afraid with our mother's milk. For by this weapon, this illusion of some safety to be found, the heavy-footed hoped to silence us.

For all of us, this instant and this triumph, we were never meant to survive. And when the sun rises, we are afraid it might not remain.

When the sun sets, we are afraid it might not rise in the morning. When our stomachs are full, we are afraid of indigestion. When our stomachs are empty, we are afraid we may never eat again.

When we are loved, we are afraid love will vanish. When we are alone, we are afraid love will never return. And when we speak, we are afraid our words will never be heard nor welcomed.

[1 : 40] But when we are silent, we are still afraid. So it is better to speak remembering we were never meant to survive.

Good morning, church. Happy New Year. My name is Shea Washington. I use she, her pronouns. I am an elder and part of the preaching team here at the table.

So many of Audre Lorde's words are a source of strength for me, but particularly the poem I just read. I am a person with a lot of fears.

Some of them warranted. Others, probably not so much, right? My various rights and freedoms being taken away as a black queer woman in Trump's America warranted.

Getting stuck and then falling to peril in an elevator shaft like I saw so much in soap operas growing up. Probably not so much. But as the author Toni Morrison said in her book Song of Solomon, what difference do it make if the thing you're scared of is real or not?

[2 : 51] And that is because it feels the same in the body. As a child, I scared easily. I have a lot of memories of my mom telling me not to panic.

No clear recollection anymore of the various things I was so panicked about, but the refrain spoken by my mother, Shea, don't panic, Shea, stop panicking.

Very clear. The way it felt and still feels in my body when I'm afraid, very clear. Everything tightens. My breathing shallows.

My heart quickens. My entire nervous system is on alert. Does anyone know the feeling? In heightened moments of fear and anxiety when our nervous systems feel most threatened, our bodies default to our survival responses.

Bite, flight, freeze, or fawn. These responses are hardwired into us and developed over time to protect us, especially if we imagine early humans facing wild animals or immediate physical danger.

[4 : 00] The challenge is that while most of the threats we face today are very different, our nervous systems don't always know that. On its own, it can't discern between a wild animal and a threatening headline or an overbearing boss.

There are ways to navigate this where the more evolved parts of our brains get involved, but this is a sermon and not a science lesson.

And so my main point here is just that so often when we are afraid, our bodies are in this hypervigilant state, which makes it hard to rest, hard to dream, hard to discern, hard to speak, hard to act with wisdom and with love.

Fear can stop us from doing and being and saying the things that we are meant to do, be, and say. How do we not let fear stop us?

How, when our fears are being weaponized day after day, do we not buy into the illusion of safety and control? Do we not just give into compliance and harm? How do we not allow ourselves to be silenced by the heavy-footed among us?

[5 : 17] What, as we begin a new year, are we meant to do? Who are we meant to be? What do we need to say? For some of us, a new year means possibility, hope, a clean slate.

For others, thinking about the next 360-something days brings the fear of potential doom. I'm somewhere between the hope and the doom, but I want to be more hope.

I want to be free from the fear of the other shoe dropping, free from the imprint of fear as a faint line on my forehead. Maybe you do too.

Throughout the Advent season, we've been in a series called What Do You Fear? And today, on Epiphany Sunday, our first Sunday together in 2026, we conclude the series by looking at the story of the Magi and how fear didn't stop them, as we consider for ourselves how we too might not let it stop us.

Would you pray with me? God of the stars, we need you. Like the Magi, we come to this place searching for you.

[6 : 32] So today, just like every day, we ask that you would be with us, that you would remove any barriers keeping us from your spirit, clear out distractions, be gentle with us in our doubts, open up our hearts, and speak to us through these ancient words.

As you do, we will keep journeying. As you do, Lord, we will move toward you. With hope, we pray. Amen.

So I don't know how familiar you are with the Christian calendar, but Epiphany, which is also called Three Kings Day in some traditions, falls on the 12th day of Christmas, which is going to be Tuesday, January 6th.

And I don't know if you're like me, but I celebrate for all 12 days. So I hope that's going well for you. Traditionally, Epiphany celebrates the arrival of the Magi to worship baby Jesus, present him with the gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, and it signals Jesus's divinity as savior to the world. Christian tradition speaks of the Magi as wise men or three kings, but the term Magoi comes actually from Old Persian, referring to the ancient Zoroastrian priestly caste, which was known for astrology, interpreting dreams, and other non-Christian stuff.

[8 : 05] Magi is actually where we get the word magic. Both men and women could hold this title. And while much of Christianity has masculinized and sanitized the story into a sweet scene of three kings bringing lovely gifts to a peaceful baby, the truth is we don't know how many Magi that there were.

We don't know their genders. And Herod was still very much in power, looming large and on the brink of committing a horrific atrocity. So epiphany is not like this soft, cozy story.

It's actually a dangerous one. During this series, we have spent time considering the what of our fears, the why of our fears, various fears, various ways that our fears might be manifesting, how we can find comfort in our fears, and ways that we should move even through our fear.

But how? How, particularly in these monstrous times, we currently find ourselves in, to borrow a phrase from Pastor Naomi Washington Leapheart.

How might we find the courage and the strength to not let fear stop us? Let's take a look at our scripture for today. It's Matthew chapter 2, verses 1 through 12.

[9 : 26] We'll also read verses 16 through 18. But let's start with just the first 12 verses. They will be on the screen as well. After Jesus was born in Bethlehem and Judea during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews?

We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him. When King Herod heard this, he was disturbed in all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born.

In Bethlehem in Judea, they replied, for this is what the prophet has written. But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah.

For out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people. Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared.

He sent them to Bethlehem and said, Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me so that I too may go and worship him. After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.

[10 : 50] When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route. So let's start right in the middle.

The Magi make it to Mary and baby Jesus. I assume Joseph is there, but he's not mentioned, so I don't know. The Magi worship Jesus. They give him the gifts. They're warned in a dream to not go back to Herod to tell him where Jesus is, so they decide to take a different route.

And that's the story. Except that there is so much more. Because the Magi have had this encounter with Jesus, and now they are standing on their shoreline at the edge of decision, hearkening back to Audre Lorde's poem.

Fear looms throughout this whole thing. Fear could have stopped them from setting out on this journey at all. They left their home in the east and set out on a long trek.

[12 : 03] It takes a lot to follow a star and worship a baby, not even within your own religious tradition. Fear could have made them turn back after the encounter with Herod.

It takes a lot to go and stand before power and make your needs and desires known. Where is the king of the Jews? We're trying to go and worship him, not you. But certainly, after getting to baby Jesus and being told in a dream to not go back to Herod, they could have turned back.

Fear could have stopped them from taking that different way home. Because it takes a lot to do a new thing, go a new way, particularly if the old way feels comfortable, familiar, popular, more efficient even.

And when someone with power over you has said, don't do that thing. But they didn't let fear stop them. Instead, the Magi cross borders.

They risk misunderstanding. They walk straight into the halls of power to ask an honest and dangerous question. And then they don't go back to tell Herod where Jesus is.

[13 : 13] How did they not let fear stop them? I think a few of the keys lie in the passage leading up to this moment. So let's start in verse one.

Let's camp out for a moment. I want to share a few things with y'all that have been sticking out to me as I've been letting all of this sort of marinate in my spirit. I'm going to offer a question at the beginning of each point.

Four questions and a bonus one. And you don't have to answer them right now. But you're invited to consider each of them over time as a potential way that fear might not stop us.

So question one. What does it mean to trust that God is with you, especially when fear tells you to stay guarded and small?

In verse one of Matthew chapter two, it opens with the line after Jesus was born in Bethlehem.

These are just the first six words of the first sentence in the first verse, but doesn't it all hang here, y'all?

[14 : 17] It really did for the Magi. This is the story of Christmas. Jesus is born a baby. The creator of heaven and earth and of all puts on skin and enters the world as a baby.

And a star signaling his birth is raised in the sky. Now I know Christmas happened like 10 days ago. We've moved on maybe. We're in a new year. But when I allow myself to take in the incarnation, when I let it settle in my bones, I can't get over it.

From day one, Jesus has been redefining power, modeling vulnerability, and embodying solidarity with us.

Emmanuel, God with us. God is with us through our fears, through it all. The Magi make their way to the born baby Jesus and in encountering him, it impacts them.

What did it mean for them? Maybe consider for a moment something you are afraid of. Something or maybe like me, multiple things that cause you to fear fearful.

[15 : 30] What does really soaking in Emmanuel, God with us, mean for you? Could you stay with this question for the rest of your life?

Probably. Because it's a big one, right? And the answers are probably going to grow and change as you do, and that's okay. Right now, I'm in a training program to become a spiritual director, a soul care practitioner.

And part of our work, part of this training process, is to choose a question to compost for the whole duration of the program. The poet and author, Rainer Maria Rilke, advises in his books, I heard a woo.

Advises in his book, Letters to a Young Poet, to live with the questions. He says that gradually over time of living the questions, you may, without noticing it, live into the answers.

And I think choosing a question or two this year to kind of turn over in your mind and in your heart and in your spirit like compost is one way of doing this.

[16:38] So that's the first question. Question two, where might we need to reposition our focus and readjust our seeing to not lose hope and succumb to fear?

The next part of verse one says that Jesus was born in the time of King Herod. So big evil still prevails.

Extractive empire still looms. Herod still on the throne. Seemingly not much has changed for the dominant norm, and it looks like they're winning.

This is where it can be easy to lose hope. When we consider the ways we feel like we are working so hard to be faithful and to work for justice, to boycott, to protest, to go high when they go low and all of the things.

We keep looking at them. We keep watching them. We keep waiting for something to happen to them. Some level of accountability or justice or anything really.

[17:45] Eyelash in the eye, flat tire, something. But it seems like they just keep thriving and it can be so disheartening. But are our eyes fixed in the right place?

On the right thing? Are we missing how God's spirit is actually moving because we're beholden to our own ideas of what that might look like?

The verse continues, and the Magi also called in some translations the seers, enter the scene. And they say to King Herod, where is the king?

They say to the king, where is the king? This is so badass and subversive to me. It cracks me up. Because I have to imagine that they knew who they were talking to.

And yet they're like, your throne is a chair to us, sir. Show us the feeding trough where the real one is so that we can worship him. And they're like, serious. So which throne are we focused on?

[18:50] Which throne are we giving the majority of our energy and our time to? The Magi were clear about where they were heading and what their focus was. They weren't doom scrolling, watching Herod's every move.

And I'm not saying that they weren't aware of Herod and his movements. I'm not saying that they weren't impacted by them. But they didn't let that throne dictate what was the throne to them. God has always been at work in the margins and through the least of these. And that's where they were headed. Are we heading there or are we trying to get closer to the dominant norm?

Are we in the center or are we on the margins? Do we have eyes to see the richness, the movements of God on the margins, the resources there, the ways that gold, frankincense, and myrrh are already there, already here?

Are we honoring the margins within this very community? If we take our focus off of the scary monster, though it indeed be scary, how might that empower us to not let fear stop us?

[20:04] Question three. Are we open to all the ways God may be wanting to guide us and speak to us? The Magi set out from their homeland because they saw a star in the sky signifying Jesus' birth.

They followed that star, stopping at Herod, and then continued on to where Jesus was. Later, God will speak to them in a dream. They were expectant and open to being guided by all the ways God can speak.

And they were compelled to journey forth even in scary times because they trusted the guide. Even in our progressiveness, are there ways we have boxed God in and therefore ourselves?

Are we open to the tarot deck but not the gift of tongues? Have we decided that worship is just one thing even when it's not the thing connected to our own heritages?

What layers of colonization, y'all, might we need to rid ourselves from to embrace the limitlessness of God? Question four.

[21 : 17] I hate this question. I don't want to ask the question, but here it is. Are y'all ready? What of Herod do we need to dismantle in us to not be ruled by fear? Often when we think of fear stopping us, it's easy to imagine not saying or doing the thing that needs to be said or done.

But fear unexamined and unchecked can also make us do and say things that cause harm and destruction, and ultimately that is also fear stopping us.

The seers make it known to Herod that Jesus has been born, and Herod is disturbed. Some translations say terrified, and most of Jerusalem with him as well.

Herod moves from a place of unexamined and unchecked fear, combined with his desire to be seen as, hold on to, and gain more oppressive power.

From that flows coercion, control, deception, separation, violence, and death. He lies to the Magi, saying that he too wants to worship the Christ child, and tells them to find him and then report back to him where Jesus is.

[22 : 29] And this is where Epiphany gets uncomfortable. Because the story does not stop with the shining star and the gifts and the Magi going back home. So let's read the rest of our passage for today, Matthew chapter 2, verses 16 through 18.

It will also be on the screen. When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious. And he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.

Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was filled. A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted because they are no more.

Matthew tells us that after the Magi leave, violence follows. Fear turns cruel, power lashes out, innocent families suffer because a king is terrified of losing control.

When Herod realizes that the Magi are not coming back to tell him where Jesus is, he calls for the slaughter of holy innocents. This is a heart-wrenching story that parallels the Exodus story and mirrors devastating modern-day events and realities happening right now.

[23 : 57] In Gaza, in Venezuela, in Sudan, the Caribbean, too many other places. Scripture does not linger in graphic detail, but it also doesn't look away.

It names the grief. It echoes the ancient lament of Rachel weeping for her children. Fear, when it rules us, demands sacrifice. It demands victims.

Fear, when it rules us, it demands the Lord to be. What of Herod in us do we need to dismantle? It can be real easy to distance ourselves from them, right?

Whomever we have determined that to be. And in that supposed distance, be walking around just leaking out harm and hurt all around us.

We have been the leakers and the leaked upon. And so check in with the way that you move in connection with oppressive Herod power versus liberating Jesus power and get real honest about what fears might be attached to that.

[25 : 04] I think we have to find people that we trust and who we know have our best interests at heart and ask them to help us uncover some things that we just might not be able to know ourselves without the help of community.

Allow that vulnerability, the same vulnerability of Jesus coming as a baby to pull you closer in connection versus what fear often does, which is to isolate us.

So, our questions to help us get closer to the how of fear not stopping us are. What does it mean to trust that God is with you, especially when fear tells you to stay guarded and small?

Where might we need to reposition our focus and readjust our seeing to not lose hope and succumb to fear? Are we open to all of the ways God may be wanting to guide us and speak to us?

And what of Herod do we need to dismantle in us to not be ruled by fear? The Magi notice a star. They remain open to mystery.

[26 : 13] They trust that God can speak through unexpected means. They walk into Herod's palace and ask, where is the king? And after encountering Christ, they take a different route home.

As I think about the Magi in consideration of Herod's power, they could have decided to ignore the dream, cooperate with fear, participate in harm by telling Herod where Jesus was.

It probably would have been safer, at least in the short term, and easier. It would have kept them in good standing with the empire, at least for a time.

But the Magi had encountered something that changed them. They had encountered Emmanuel, which made compliance intolerable. And this was not a small decision. It was an act of resistance, a refusal to let fear dictate their obedience. Audre Lorde reminds us that fear often convinces us that silence will protect us, but it never has.

[27 : 22] Fear isolates. Love connects. Fear constricts. Love restores. In this case, the Magi do not go and confront Herod with swords or with speeches.

They choose another way home. And sometimes radical love looks like that. So here's the bonus question, inspired by the Magi, and not really a key to fear not stopping us, but potentially a key to our next steps after determining that we won't be stopped by fear.

And the question is this. Where might God be guiding you that doesn't look safe or sanctioned, but feels deeply true? What is your alternative way home?

Maybe this is your compost question for a while this year. The hard truth that Epiphany gives us is that choosing another way does not undo the harm already done.

The children of Bethlehem are still lost. Rachel still weeps. God does not magically erase the cost of fear. But God does something else. God refuses to let fear define the future.

[28 : 37] God shepherds us through showing us a different way. A way rooted in radical love. A way that encourages us to rest and to dream.

A way that lets us release tension from our bodies. Take deep restorative breaths. A way that keeps our heartbeats steady.

Prolonged fear and hypervigilance is exhausting, y'all. And none of us deserve to live there. The shepherd guides, not by scarcity, but by abundance.

Psalm 23 in the message version says, The shepherd beds us down in lush meadows and finds us quiet pools to drink from.

I want that. Even when the path runs through shadowed valleys, we are not abandoned. God is with us.

[29 : 41] God is with us. God is with us. So church, the holiday hustle and bustle, it's coming to a close. We are in a new year and we are about to move into ordinary time in the Christian calendar.

Some things are going to fall back into regular routine, but there is also an opportunity for newness. A different way home. Not a different way requiring our striving, our grasping, our exhaustion, but a way that is gentle.

A way that is compassionate and light. Will we move the way that fear makes us move? Or will we take our cue from the Magi and not let fear stop us?

I pray for all of us that it will be the latter. Amen? Amen. Okay. I want to allow us some time to reflect, to pause, to breathe, to just be.

There is an incredible song version of Psalm 23 that we're going to play as we do that. The song is called The Lord is My Shepherd and it's on the soundtrack of a Christmas movie that I love called The Preacher's Wife.

[30 : 58] And the song is sung by Hezekiah Walker and the Love Fellowship Crusade Choir. The soloist that you're going to hear is Sissy Houston. This is Whitney Houston's mother. As you listen, listen for the Hammond organ playing.

It's a staple of traditional gospel music. Listen for the three-part harmony of the choir. But more than anything, just let your soul listen and maybe find strength or rest or whatever you need most during this time.

Later in the song, Sissy sings, He prepares a table before me in the presence of my enemies. And then you'll hear the altos come in and say, He anointeth my head with oil.

My cup just runneth over. And if you could use a little of that anointing this morning as we journey into 2026, feel free to lift your head in that moment or kneel or stand or whatever you want to do to receive that anointing this morning.

Okay? Okay? Okay?