

“Who Invited Herod to Christmas?”

Matthew 2:1-12, 16-18

2nd Sunday after Christmas Day

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I have a favor to ask of you as we start this new year.

And the favor that was on my mind when I started working on this sermon was not whether any of you would be willing to serve as scripture readers on Sunday mornings—HOWEVER, I will note for you...that’s why Lauren read the scripture passage this morning.

Because we couldn’t find any lay readers for today.

So if you’re willing to serve as a lay reader, please let Michelle in our church office know.

I’m sure she would appreciate hearing from you.

Now the original favor I set out to ask of you, I still would like to do so...but before I ask the favor, I’m going to begin with a question about the passages that you just heard, the one that Lauren read and the one that I read.

As you were listening to these two texts this morning, did you notice the DARKNESS?

Were you paying attention to the darkness?

We heard about it first from Isaiah:

“Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you.”

It's a beautiful passage.
 A glorious text.
 A scripture about the appearance of God's light and the revelation
 of God's glory.

But the reason God sends God's light, according to Isaiah, is the
 darkness...not just any darkness, but THICK darkness.

Have you ever been in THICK darkness before?

The Presbyterian pastor Scott Black Johnston used to be a
 seminary professor, and he tells of the time that a student at the seminary
 was studying a passage of Scripture that spoke about DARKNESS.

In order to make the text come alive, this student tried to find the
 darkest place in the seminary.

After some searching, she located an old, rarely-if-ever used
 racquetball court. It was underground, below a dormitory—sealed off
 from the outside world, a place that never received even a smidgeon of
 sunlight.

When the day of her presentation came,
 she led her class to this racquetball court,
 this room that nobody knew was there...
 and she turned out the lights...
 and she let everyone sit, and sit, and sit some more...
 in the darkness.

It was pitch dark.
 It was can't-see-your-hand-in-front-of-your-face dark.
 After five minutes, she lit a match.
 And EVERYTHING CHANGED.

Some of her classmates stood in surprise and wonder.
A couple had tears running down their cheeks.¹

It was a marvelous lesson about light, the impact that a little light can have...but it was also a lesson about darkness.

How darkness can be a VERY powerful thing.

I think the Gospel writer Matthew would have given that student an A+ on her presentation.

Because in his own way, Matthew tells the same story.
It's a familiar story, right?

A story of light, of a beautiful and dazzling star,
a star which leads the wise men from the East to Jesus.

And we call this the story of Epiphany.
A story of illumination.
A story of how Jesus came to be light even to the Gentiles,
light even to folks like you and me.

But let's not forget—Matthew is very clear:
that light is surrounded by darkness.

“In the time of King Herod...”
That's how Matthew begins this story.

And the more we learn about Herod, the more we can see...
darkness is a VERY powerful thing.

¹ As told by the Rev. Dr. Scott Black Johnston in his sermon, “Luminarias,” December 24, 2006, on Day 1, at [Luminarias | Day 1](#).

Whether Herod is trying to trick the wise men, as he does in verse 8...

or whether he's trying to hunt down Jesus,
as he does in verse 13...

or whether he's murdering all children in Bethlehem
under the age of 3, as we read in verse 16...well.

There's as much darkness in the second chapter of Matthew as you and I might hear about in our world today.

After all, darkness can take many forms, right?

- The cold-blooded assassination of Brian Thompson last month.
- Or the murder of 15 people in a New Year's Day celebration in New Orleans this month.

There's the darkness of people who actively oppose the love of God by dehumanizing and demonizing other children of God.

And there's the darkness we might find within ourselves.
Within the very people who want to SHARE the love of God.
Not even the most faithful are immune to the darkness.

Do you remember what Mother Theresa wrote about her own spiritual state?

“Please pray for me, that it may please God to lift this darkness from my soul for only a few days. For sometimes the desolation is so great...”²

² Mother Theresa, *Come Be My Light: The Private Writings of the "Saint of Calcutta,"* edited by Brian Kolodiejchuk, M.C., New York: Doubleday, 2007.

Now some of you may be thinking at this point, good grief.
Why all this talk about darkness?
It's the first Sunday of the new year.
Things are pretty good around here.
All true.

For example, I would be remiss if on the Sunday that I'm preaching about the magi, I failed to mention the Magi Market that so many of you helped with last month. Something like 400 toys donated, and 90 children, from the Pleasant Valley neighborhood next door, those families received gifts that they would not otherwise have received at Christmas.

I was so amazed at what God did, because of your generosity, what God did through you in the days leading up to Christmas.

Speaking of Christmas, how many of you decided to ignore your pastor's advice, and you chose the 4p service instead of the 6p service on Christmas Eve?

It's ok. I'm not upset with you.

Over 1200 people were in attendance at our 4p Christmas Eve service this year, larger than anyone around here can ever remember.

And I'm not complaining.

In a day and age when church attendance and growth is going downhill, it's a good problem to have.

And not that you care, but my Minnesota Vikings are having their best season since my first year in ministry. Now the favor I have to ask is not that you root for them in the playoffs, although I wouldn't object to it if you do.

My point is shouldn't your preacher be in a good mood this morning?

Why all this talk about darkness?

I'm not discussing darkness with you today because I want to be down in the dumps with all of you. **I'm discussing darkness because I have a favor to ask you.**

You see, for my entire ministry, whenever I've preached about this text, I've always preached that the heart of this story lies in the gifts that the wise men brought.

What were the gifts that the wise men brought?
Gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Compare that to the Isaiah text.
Matthew clearly had our Isaiah text in mind when he wrote the story of the wise men.

The sixth verse of chapter 60, do you remember it?

"They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord."

Do you see?
Matthew was working straight from Isaiah.
But which gift does NOT appear in the Isaiah passage?

Myrrh.

In other words, Matthew echoed this Isaiah passage, with it's talk of light and darkness and gifts from foreign kings...but Matthew also added myrrh.

Which was used for what back in Matthew's day?
Embalming.

Every time I've preached on this text in the past, including from this pulpit, I've treated myrrh as the HEART of the story.

Why does Matthew add the myrrh?

Because he's not just talking about the birth of Jesus when the wise men arrive.

He's talking about the death and resurrection of Jesus.

That's why Matthew added myrrh.

He's beginning his story of Jesus by foreshadowing the END of the story, to show how the light of Epiphany is really a reflection of Easter light.

It's Matthew's way of dealing with the darkness.

It's Matthew's way of saying that no matter what darkness you may you're dealing with right now, the risen Christ has claimed you.

- If you're staring addiction or depression in the face, God has NOT abandoned you.
- If you're walking through previously unknown corridors of grief, God has not forgotten you.
- If you're helpless to help your own child, do not be afraid. God is with your child, just like God is with you.

The light of Epiphany is Easter light.

That's why Matthew includes the myrrh, and that's the theory I've preached about this text for the past 27 years.

And then this week—pardon the pun—I had an epiphany.
And something else occurred to me.
It's a new explanation for all that darkness.

My new theory is very simple:
God's does some of God's best work, not in the light, but in the dark.

Take a look at the wise men.
How do the wise men get to Jesus?
By following a star.
If you go outside after worship, will you see stars?
No...because it's day.

That means the wise men most likely traveled to Bethlehem at night. **It means God led them to Jesus...in the dark.**

I think God does some of God's best work in the dark.
Take a look at Joseph.

When did Joseph hear the voice of God,
first telling him to take Mary as his wife,
then telling him to flee to Egypt,
because Herod wanted to kill his newborn son?

He heard God's voice in his dreams, while he was asleep.
He heard God's voice the dark.

The more I read this story, the more curious I became about other biblical stories.

How about the Easter story?
When did Easter happen?
When was Jesus raised?

Not in broad daylight.

God raised Jesus...in a tomb, in the dark.

You see, I think the Biblical evidence is there.

God does some of God's most astounding work in the dark.

Now, if I'm not mistaken, I think there are others out there who also believe it to be true.

Did you hear what happened to Rembrandt's painting of this text?

Rembrandt painted "The Adoration of the Magi" sometime in the early 1630's, but the original was lost, with only copies on display these days...or at least, that was the thought, until a few years ago, when one of those copies fell off a wall in a country home outside of Rome.

The frame was damaged.

The owners sent it to an art restorer.

And it turned out to be original!

The restorer, Antonella Di Francesco, described the excitement of that moment: "...one of the most beautiful things that can happen during a lifetime: the sudden awareness of being in front of a work by a very great author who reveals himself to you...and chooses you to be redeemed from the darkness..."³

If you get a moment after worship, Google that painting.

³ [Rembrandt masterpiece thought lost is found after falling off wall | CNN](#)

Take a look at Rembrandt's use of light and darkness in that painting.

I think Rembrandt believed it to be true.
That God does some of God's most life-giving work in the dark...

Or how about the writer, Anne Lamott?

Lamott tells the story of how a friend once took her then 2-year-old son to Lake Tahoe where they stayed in a condominium.

One afternoon this friend put her toddler in a pitch-dark room in his playpen so he could sleep, and she went to do some work. A few minutes later she heard her baby knocking on the door from inside the room.

She got up, knowing he'd crawled out of the playpen. But when she got to the door, she discovered...to her horror...that he had somehow managed to lock it ***FROM THE INSIDE***.

The little button on the knob—he had pushed it in.

He was calling, "Mommy, mommy."

She was saying, "Jiggle the knob, darling..."

But she knew full well that her son had no idea what she was talking about.

After a moment, it became clear to this toddler that his mother **COULD NOT** open the door, and panic set in.

He began sobbing.

His mother ran around like crazy, trying to get the door to work, calling the rental agency to leave a message, calling the manager to

leave another message, running back to talk to her son...And there, in the dark, was this terrified little child.

Finally, she did the only thing she could, which was to slide her fingers underneath the door, where there was a bit of space. She kept telling her boy to bend down and find her fingers, and somehow he did.

So they stayed like that a really long time...
 that toddler holding her fingers in the dark...
 feeling her presence, knowing her love...⁴

And this is where I have a favor to ask you.
 I THINK I'm right about my new theory about this text.

But I've got a problem.
 The Gospel writer Matthew...he's long gone.
 So is Rembrandt.
 And I don't know Anne Lamott.

I can't ask any of them.
 But I can ask you.

My favor that I need to ask of you is this:

I want you to take my new theory about this text—
**that God does some of God's most grace-filled,
 redeeming work in the dark—**

and I want you to spend some time in the new year
 testing that theory out.

⁴ Anne Lamott, *Operating Instructions: A Journal of My Son's First Year*, New York: Anchor Books/Random House, 1993.

Because I suspect that somewhere among your friends, or in your family, or among your neighbors, I'll bet someone you know is dealing with THICK DARKNESS.

Locked in a room that they cannot escape on their own.

You may not be the one who can rescue them.

You may not be the one who can heal them.

You may not even be able to unlock whatever door has them trapped.

But you know what you can do, don't you?

You can get real close to their darkness.

You can offer them your hand.

You can offer them heart.

You can hold a few fingers under the door for them, so that they know they're not alone...

You see, my theory about this text is that God does some of God's most miraculous work in the dark, and the people whom God is sending to do that work...are not a bunch of magi from long ago.

The people whom God is sending...are each of you.

God is EAGER to do give someone else a gift through you this coming year.

All you have to do is find some darkness...and be God's light.

Is that too big of a favor to ask, on this first Sunday of the new year?

(Amen.)