

“Star Gazing”

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Presbyterian Church in Leonia

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Epiphany Sunday

I want to tell a story about a very, very long time ago. The Hebrew people lived in the land of Egypt. For them, it was a land of enslavement. They were forced to make bricks without straw, endless, backbreaking work for the purpose of building up Pharaoh’s monuments. Those who did not do as they were asked, were whipped. They were descendents of Joseph, the great-grandson of Abraham. Joseph was a dreamer, and his dreams gave him the vision that kept Egypt in plenty, even when the rest of the region starved with a famine. Joseph had been elevated to Pharaoh’s top advisor. But as generations passed, Joseph’s name and legacy were forgotten by the Egyptians. Still, the Hebrew people knew of his greatness and passed his stories along by night, around the fire. They whispered of God bringing to them another great one, who could deliver them yet again— but instead of from famine, this leader would deliver them from slavery. The legends grew and grew and they gave the Hebrew people hope. Pharaoh noticed that something buoyed the spirits of the Hebrew people he had enslaved. He heard whispers of their God sending someone who would set them free. And he was mad. Mad, mad. And so, Pharaoh announced an edict, that all Hebrew born baby boys should be drowned in the River Nile. It was a genocide. It was evil. But there was one funny thing about it: Pharaoh failed to think that the Hebrew girls or women could ever be a threat to him. Shiprah and Puah, the Hebrew midwives, kept arriving “late” to the Hebrew births, so could not drown the babies. When asked why they weren’t following the law, they said, “Well, you know those Hebrew women. They’re like animals, basically. They are so vigorous, they deliver right away— too late for us to arrive and follow through with the orders.” She counted on their oppressors’ assumption about otherness— that Hebrew women don’t give birth like Egyptians— and in this case, assumptions saved a generation of babies. And when the baby boy Moses was born, instead of drowning the baby in the Nile law demanded, his mother put him into a lined basket, and set him on the water, floating like in a little boat. His sister Miriam watched from the reeds. Pharaoh’s daughter was bathing in the river, when she saw the baby, floating right to her. She drew him out of the water, and announced that she would raise him as her son. Out from the reeds Miriam popped, announcing that she knew a wet-nurse who could feed him. And she marched Moses right back to their very own mother. He grew at the knee of his Hebrew people, and knowing the language of his oppressor, as well as the language of his people, he used his bicultural skills— and the amazing power of God— to subvert Pharaoh and lead the Hebrew people to their freedom. They headed into the wilderness, and after 40 years settled into the land of Canaan.

I want to tell another story, about a very long time ago. In the land that had once been known as Canaan, but many generations it had become known for the Hebrew king David— but that memory had mostly been erased, too, for the mighty and powerful Roman Empire held all the

rule there. As subjects to that rule, the Hebrew people choked under the tyranny of Roman rule, and they dreamed of the day that God would raise up again a leader, like Moses, like David, and make them free from Rome. It was Caesar Augustus who required each adult male to return to his hometown, and register for a census. Joseph had to return, with Mary, his betrothed and pregnant partner, to Bethlehem— and Rome had not erased in the mind of the Hebrew people that this was the city of David, who had defeated so many threatening armies— and that their prophets had promised a branch from the stump of David's father Jesse would spring forth to lead the people yet again. Herod knew this hope that inspired confidence in the Hebrew people. He had been appointed— by Rome— as the provincial ruler over Judea. Herod was raised as a Jew, thanks to his mother, but it was his father who brought him to the power that really won his heart; his father had been friendly with the Roman dictator Julius Caesar himself. Like father, like son; Herod always elbowed his way into Caesar Augustus' favor, and any threat to his place on the throne he wanted to eliminate. And so, when he encountered three men, who had come from further East than Herod had ever seen, claiming to be following a star that had risen in the East, he grew worried. Were they magicians? Astrologers? Kings? It did not matter, but their message did: they were coming to pay homage to the king of the Jews, who had been born. "Go, search diligently for the child, and when you find him, come back and tell me, so that I may pay him homage too," he told the magi in secret. And so off they went, until the star stopped moving them forward: above a stable it hovered, and there they met the Messiah, and fell to the floor, praising him and opening their treasure chests to offer their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Like the Joseph many generations before him, this Joseph, who would raise Jesus, was a dreamer, too. And after the magi left, Joseph dreamed that he must take Mary and Jesus and flee into Egypt— the place that had once enslaved their people— to find their freedom, for Herod was out for blood, and wanted to kill each Hebrew child, male or female (I guess he learned his lesson to never underestimate a girl's ability to thwart a kingdom). As for the magi, they must have gone home by a different way— like the Hebrew midwives, they decided they were not going to be accessories to Herod's schemes.

Isn't it remarkable how much one story, from the first book of the Hebrew bible, reflects so much of the story of Jesus we find in the first book of the Gospels? It is like the characters are reflected back to us in a rippling lake. Why do we get both these stories? Did the histories *really* line up so neatly, that one could be so similar to the other? Scholars suspect, probably not. But that doesn't mean there's not still truth to these stories, and our need to repeat them year after year. We need these stories because there will always be a Pharaoh. There will always be a Herod. There will always be a Caesar. **But...** there will also always be dreamers. There will always be those who nurture and inspire and love our next liberator— they will swaddle her, they will burp and rock him, even in the midst of threat and danger, and they will teach them the traditions and stories that point us toward God's justice. There will always be outsiders who show us a different way— that we in fact do not have to follow an unrighteous ruler, that there are ways to resist, subtle ways and brazen ways. And there will always be a shimmering light, to show us the way. Maybe that light is upon you. In fact, it probably is, you just need to be open enough to see it and to share it.

“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 God’s glory will appear over you.”

The prophet promised these words to the Hebrew people, long, long before Jesus was born, and they clung to it, for centuries, as their hope. I believe those words are shared for us too, long, long after Jesus was born, meant to feed our hopes too. And so, Christian people, I want to invite you to walk, as the Spirit moves you, to the Communion table, and to pick a star from the table. Maybe it will help you find that light and shine it. You will find on the other side of the star a word. Try to use it when you pray. Let it guide your thoughts. If you don’t know what it means, look it up– there are a few words from languages east of here, and their meanings may speak to you. After church, tell someone what your star word is, and ponder with them what it might mean for you today. Renée will play a couple minutes of meditative music. And if you are worshiping with us online, I am going to ask you to write “Star Word” in the comments, and our tech crew will choose a word for you, too, replying in your comment. May Jesus, who is the word made flesh, speak to you anew in this season of Epiphany.