

“Going Home Another Way”  
Based on Mt 2: 1-12  
Rev. Dr. Nicole Wilkinson  
Cape May Presbyterian Church  
January 7, 2024

Every time I read this passage it strikes me. When Herod hears that the King of the Jews has been born, we are told, “he was frightened, and all of Jerusalem with him.” Shouldn’t they be excited? They’re the people whom the King of the Jews is to lead. Herod is supposed to be Jewish himself, though he’s propped up in his position by his cooperation with the Roman empire. Why are they all frightened that a future leader, someone divinely ordained, has been born to their own people? You can guess why. Because the very words, King of the Jews, mean that the child now born is going to rock the boat. And it is not a really well-balanced boat to begin with. It’s barely staying afloat, actually. Barely maintaining Jewish identity and the freedom to worship at the temple within the Roman empire. Someone claiming to be the King of the Jews is not just likely to unseat *Herod*. He’s also likely to bring the whole delicate balance down on all their heads.

They’re not wrong, exactly, to be scared. The older we all get the more we come to understand that there are good reasons to be afraid of change. Good reasons, maybe, to fear people who *aren’t* afraid of change. We have seen freedom seeking revolutions, regime change that seems long overdue, too often end up in repression and chaos and failed states. People might gain new freedoms, new life, new ways to relate to one another. Or they might lose everything they have now, and then some. After all, there’s a sense in which had we been more afraid of change, or at least cautious about it, in the last two hundred years, we would not have that great island of plastic floating in the ocean, and the polar icecap wouldn’t be melting faster than we can calculate.

There’s a great line in the musical *My Fair Lady*, where the linguist Henry Higgins is confronted by Eliza, the woman whom he has transformed into a lady. Didn’t you think for a minute about what the consequences would be? She asks him. “If everyone thought about the consequences,” he snaps back, “no one would do anything at all!”

The possible consequences of any action, any change, can truly be daunting, even paralyzing. Change is scary. Not even just for us older folks. Don’t bother asking my son Ahmet, age 23, how he feels about the arches on the promenade. Or any

improvement I ever made to my house. He's against it. In principle. He jokes that he's going to run for president and his campaign slogan is going to be, "Stop the Change." Any change, all change.

It's important to have the joke, actually, because it's an easy way to say, is it the paint color you don't like or is it just the change? Are the arches really horrible, or is the problem actually just that they're new?

On a more serious note, it's important for us to remember the reaction of Herod and Jerusalem. Some stargazers, readers, thinkers, astrologers from far away make a long journey to be there to welcome Jesus's birth. They're not Jewish, they don't read scripture, they don't worship the same God. But *they're* excited. While the people who live within a couple days walk of Jesus' birthplace, the people who speak his language and worship the God who sent him-- they're scared.

When we find ourselves resisting change, when we find ourselves saying that things are fine the way they are, or the way they were, when we find ourselves unnerved by what we do not know, or simply by the idea of the future, which will surely be different than the past, when we find ourselves afraid, we need to remember the people of ancient Jerusalem, unnerved by the birth of a child born King of the Jews. We need to make a concerted effort not to be those frightened people.

Because resistance to change sounds like a normal, human thing, and it is. But first of all, as they say in Star Trek, resistance is futile. Change is going to happen one way or another. And secondly, resistance to change, as we see in this story, can be deadly. When people get real good and scared about the changes they feel are afoot, those people can be cruel—the cruelty we read in Matthew's gospel is real. We've seen these things happen; people so terrified by the changes in the society around them that their fear becomes violence.

In the midst of the brewing storm that is Herod's fear, the safest thing the wise men could have done, having found Jesus and his mother, having given the family their gifts and paid their respects, having accomplished, that is, what they came to Bethlehem to do—the safest thing the wise men could have done would be to go right back to Herod and tell him, "we found the King of the Jews, he and his mother live at the corner of Main St and Broad in Bethlehem, the baby's adorable, tell Mary we said hi."

Yes, they're warned in a dream not to do that. But if they were looking out only for their own interests, they still would have done it. *Not* doing it puts their own

lives in danger. As we find out if we keep reading Matthew's gospel, Herod is perfectly willing to kill innocent people in his quest to nip this whole King of the Jews thing in the bud. That's how scared he is of what a new King of the Jews would mean.

But the wise men neither obey Herod, nor do they defy him. They neither do as he asks and come back to tell him the whole story, nor do they send any defiant messages back or tell Herod to his face, we are not on your side. Instead, they pay their homage to Jesus, avoid contact with Herod, and find another way home. I imagine they were still trying to figure out, amongst themselves, what it all meant. What does it mean that this child's death was announced by a star? That they are now getting dreams from a god they don't even believe in? That Herod in fact has no intention of paying homage to the one born king of his own people?

One thing the wise men know, that Herod does not. This story isn't about Herod. It's about Jesus. The fact that Jesus' birth might bring scary changes into Herod's life, into Herod's world—well, that's not really the point, is it? The point is not what's going to happen to Herod. It's what's going to happen through Jesus. I suspect that when we are most afraid of change, what would help is to shift our focus. This may feel bad and scary to me, but for whom is this good news? Can I rejoice on their behalf? Again, we need to remember that the life of Jesus—healer, teacher, prince of peace—his life of saving compassion brought a change that many people feared. And we do not want to be those people.