

Grace to you and peace from God, our Creator, and from our Savior, Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Tomorrow officially marks the last day of the Christmas season. We're leaving the familiarity and comfort of the Christmas story, and moving into the season of celebrating God's promise of salvation being revealed for everyone.

Matthew's gospel tells us about this promise through the story of the Magi – astrologers from the east.

We don't know a lot about who the Magi were – at least not specific details. We don't know how many there were, or even if they all came from the same country. What we do know is that they weren't Jewish.

Their faith and spiritual tradition was to study the stars. That's how God got their attention. Their religion helped them understand that something important had happened – most likely a royal birth. So, they set out to a place they'd probably never been before, eager to pay homage to a king.

And their arrival called attention to the baby born in Bethlehem in a way that couldn't be ignored. Not only did it show everyone that God was serious about the Messiah being for all people, it also showed the magnitude of God's power.

According to scripture, up to this point, Jesus' birth had gone unnoticed by the people in power. But on the whole, Christ's birth was especially troublesome for Herod. Herod was king because the Roman government appointed him, not because he was Jewish. And he was willing to do whatever it took to hold onto the title because of the power that came with it.

So, learning that a king in the line of David had been born – which was the Jewish line of royalty – that scared him. And if Herod was afraid, the people were afraid of him. And rightly so. He was a tyrant. When he figured out that the Magi weren't coming back, Herod ordered the deaths of all male children under the age of 2 so that he could keep his seat on the throne.

It's never a good sign when people in power fear competition. If the competition motivates them to do their job well, that's one thing. But if they're afraid of it, it means they know their power isn't what it should be – that it hasn't measured up to set standards.

And even though they'd never admit it, it means they distrust their own power, and question their sense of control and authority. As Matthew tells it, at the time these events took place, Herod's main competition was a toddler. But his reaction to Jesus' birth isn't any different from anyone in power today that feels threatened by possible competition for it.

When people in power understand authority only in terms of winners and losers, when they engage in blatant power grabs, when they deflect accountability and responsibility, when they say that people who tell the truth are troublemakers, when they systematically eliminate opposition – even if they only think it might be there – those are all signs that they're aware of their own inadequacy.

They are signs of their inability to recognize that even the most effective and respected leaders have blind spots.

The Magi recognized all of this in Herod. They believed the angel that spoke to them in their dream, and they knew that Herod had lied to them and they refused to participate in and perpetuate his actions. So, they went home by another road.

In the last two thousand-plus years, Herod's actions in this story have been repeated by countless leaders at every level.

In the case of Venezuela, Herod's actions were repeated when Nicolás Maduro ignored the will of his people and held onto leadership through force and violence. They were repeated again yesterday in our government's violent action against Maduro. And if our government carries through on the next steps it has announced for this situation, the violence will be repeated again.

I've said this before. It's easy to become overwhelmed by the Herods of this world. It's tempting to turn our backs on the harm they cause as they seem to dominate and even be winning according to the world's standards. Especially if the harm doesn't directly affect us.

But Matthew's gospel reveals our Messiah, our Savior, as someone who teaches us another way. Someone who teaches us to confront the world's standards and follow a different road, to live according to a different kind of power. A power that guides and shapes us as people of faith, that brings in God's kingdom, that makes God's realm visible in our world today.

Because it's the power that reminds us that Jesus is the one that leads us.

That's a bold statement to make in any time, let alone when there's so much division in our nation and our world about what it means to follow Jesus.

But when we remember that Jesus leads us, we remember how he was and who he was. We remember what he taught people and the way he lived his life.

The people he intentionally reached out to and spent time with. The way he revealed God to the world and how that changed everything.

Living according to that power, following that road, very often puts us at odds with the world as it currently is.

Because remembering that Jesus is the one that leads us means we speak the truth about the way things truly are in our own nation and in others. It gives us the courage to call a situation for what it is, to speak out against leaders that advocate violence and oppression no matter where they govern or how high an office they hold. It gives us the strength to not normalize violence in any form – regardless of what the party line might be.

But as we speak these truths, we don't only say the words. We don't just make noise. We turn the mirror toward ourselves and examine our own actions. We live into Jesus' teachings of loving our enemies and praying for them. We love our neighbor. We feed people who are hungry. We clothe and house people who need safety and shelter.

We work for true peace – not just the absence of violence, but the presence of justice. And we do the work for as long as it takes, because we live according to the power that makes God's realm visible in our world today. We walk the road that reveals God's power.

It's easy to do all of this as individuals, but remembering who's leading us is vital for us as a community, too. When people come to be part of our faith community – whether it's for a day or a season or a lifetime, they look to us to see God's presence in the world. And they do see it when we remember that Jesus is the one that leads us.

That doesn't mean we agree on everything, or even that we get along all the time because we don't. No one expects that.

But it does mean that we don't tear each other down when we disagree. Instead, we listen to one another, we encourage each other to keep going when the road gets long, and we accompany one another when life gets to be too much.

When we remember that Jesus is the one that leads us, we follow a different road. Because the power of God is different than the power the world seeks.

When we remember that Jesus is the one that leads us, we discover that God's power guides and shapes us as people of faith. It empowers us to embody the love and peace that Jesus brought into our world. Because it's a power that works through us to make God's realm visible in our world today.

Thanks be to God! Amen.