

Isaiah 63:7-9 • Psalm 148 • Hebrews 2:10-18 • Matthew 2:13-23

<<Music: “*Building Up a New World*,” 1st verse, fade out under opening sentence.>>

<<“*We are building up a new world, builders must be strong.*”>>

Welcome to “The Word is Resistance,” a lectionary based podcast exploring what the Bible has to say about making sense of life under empire, what the Bible has to say about building movements that resist structures of evil, particularly the evil of white supremacy. How might these holy words strengthen us, challenge us, and invite us to the work of liberation in our time?

This live recording of Dr. Vincent Harding’s song for the freedom movement is of a multi-racial “movement choir practice” in Denver, CO in December 2014, being led by Minister Daryl J. Walker. We are deeply grateful to the Freeney-Harding family for letting us use the song for this podcast.

My name is Claire Brown, joining the podcast for the first time today. I’m a spouse and mom, a writer, and an Episcopal priest. I live and work in Eastern Cherokee and Creek territory, in Chattanooga, Tennessee, named from the Creek word for a nearby mountain, Lookout Mountain in English. The word Chattanooga means “rock rising to a point.”

This podcast is a project of SURJ Faith as a resource for white people doing the work of dismantling white supremacy as part of our faith in Jesus Christ. If you’re someone taking on responsibility to challenge systems of oppression, including those racist oppressions within the Christian tradition, we hope that this podcast is a helpful tool and space for exploration. This is not a white only space, and we welcome feedback and accountability from listeners of color always.

Before we turn to the texts this week, I invite you to pray with me for a moment of silence, which I will conclude with the collect from the BCP for the First Sunday after Christmas Day:

Almighty God, you have poured upon us the new light of your incarnate Word: Grant that this light, enkindled in our hearts, may shine forth in our lives; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Not unlike the Bible, my tradition’s *Book of Common Prayer* is inextricably linked with white supremacy and colonization through the Anglican enmeshment with British Empire and Episcopal enmeshment with U.S. American empire. As most religious texts have been, its words have been used to oppress, to commodify, to excuse, to distance. But it is also full of creative and gritty hope, visions of new ways to be together in God, and a guide to grace and freedom.

So this week, especially, I choose to look back into my tradition for the lights, for the moments of liberation, seeds of resistance, hope and resilience, those Anglicanisms that wrestled the tradition out of the hands of colonizers. Because now we are in the liturgical season of the

incarnation, the feast days that celebrate that God has been and is in our midst in surprising and subversive ways, grace in the midst of violence, courage in the midst of fear.

<<Music interlude, verse 2 of “Building Up a New World.”>>

<<“Courage, sisters, brothers, people: don’t get weary, though the way be long.”>>

On the first Sunday after Christmas, we dive into the next chapter of the baby Jesus, the holy family in flight to Egypt to escape the wrath of King Herod in Matthew 2. Though the lectionary gospel this week picks up at verse 13, let’s look earlier in the text at the set up to this story, which offers us a glimpse into some of the power dynamics at play.

The chapter begins: *“In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising and have come to pay him homage.” When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.”*

King Herod the Great was the puppet king of the Roman Empire in Judea, the local branch of a vast system of exploitation. His story was one of massive drama—affair, divorce, murder, political power playing. In King Herod, we see a government leader who holds a terrorizing power, with high levels of anxiety, low to no levels of organizational and community health, dysfunctioning under the contingency of Rome’s approval. He ruled through a culture of unstable and jealous power, holding toxic alliances and lashing out irrationally at any threats to his legacy.

We’re no stranger to that kind of community governance, which leaves people in a continual state of anxiety and confusion, but let’s come back to that later.

Matthew’s magi are some of the most emblematic figures of the Christmas season, and yet some of the most mysterious characters in the gospel. The popular tradition calls them the three kings or the wise men, but they were more likely scholars of astronomy and astrology, or priests, and while the Christmas carols say there were three, we don’t actually know how many there were from the gospel text.

We know that these folks had significant autonomy and resources to pursue the adventure of seeking out the star and its significations. They must have been privileged to be able to offer such costly gifts to the holy family. Far from their home, they were unattached to the power games of Herod in which they found themselves, and came to pay homage, not to make alliance or challenge authority. But in their seeking, as they approach Herod, they find out what the stakes are, learning about the prophecies of Torah and get an introduction to the ways and demeanor of Herod. Their repeated phrase, “King of the Jews,” points out Herod’s own fraught relationship with both his authority and his Jewishness, each undermining the other as he

betrayed his people for position and power through the Roman empire. Imagine how the magi's seeking, their clear-sighted articulation to find a king, would have grated on Herod's ego.

With instruction to inform Herod, the Magi go to visit Jesus, Mary and Joseph. But after being warned in a dream, that strange sleeping terrain of our deepest unconscious insights and spiritual epiphanies, the magi avoid Herod after their departure. They refuse to be complicit in the violence to come.

And now our lectionary picks up.

*"Now after [the magi] had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.'"*

A common theme across the gospels is the way that their writers build the story of Jesus into the story of the Jewish people. It is meant to feel familiar, yet somehow new, as they interpreted their experiences of Jesus as the fulfillment and extension of God's work among God's people *and* as a unique and new way that God was being present to God's people.

So in this point of the plot, Matthew wants his audience to understand that this story is one that they have heard before. Let's see where...

The text goes on, *"When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem..."*

We've got a mad, power hungry ruler killing all of the babies of the Hebrew people, but one special baby is going to be saved. Jesus is being set up in the framework of the Moses story, and the narrator is laying a foundation for the redemptive arc of the Exodus.

The gospel offers a quote from the prophet Jeremiah to further cement this connection, marking the flight to Egypt from Herod's infanticide as a fulfillment of ancient texts.

*"A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more."*

Rachel's weeping and Mary's running are forms of the women's resistance that is strong in the story of God's people. The lamentation, the running, the preservation of children is the inheritance of Shiphrah and Puah, the Hebrew midwives who helped the enslaved women save their children from Pharaoh's murderous attempt on their sons.

Do you know the spiritual, "Oh Mary Don't You Weep"? The song originated in enslaved communities in the United States and was made known broadly by the Fisk Jubilee Singers from Nashville, Tennessee, who performed it on tour and recorded the song in 1915. The lyrics,

“O Mary, don’t you weep, don’t you mourn. Pharaoh’s army got drowned-ed, O Mary don’t you weep,” connect the grief of Jesus’ mother with the resistance text of the Exodus. That long line of liberation hope in spite of all odds was sung out in beautiful melody and beautiful biblical understanding to those working to be free in the midst of chattel slavery, and stands through time as a movement song.

<<Musical interlude: “Building Up a New World,”>>

God’s people, the children of Jacob, fled to Egypt first for safety from famine, then moved on again in the Exodus to their promised land. But as the holy family mirrors that journey, returning again to Judea after the news that Herod was dead. But they find that the threat, the nightmare, is not over.

The story goes on: *“But when [Joseph] heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. After being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee.”*

Though Herod had died, his hatred and twisted relationship to the powers over him and people he ruled lived on in a new iteration through his son. The fear and violence passed onto the next generation, same oppression with a new face. So it is

Matthew makes this conclusion part of yet another fulfillment text, “He will be called a Nazorean.” Although this quotation is not found in any of the Hebrew Bible scriptures, we see that the writer is committed to conveying that this story of Jesus is Jewish through and through, deeply rooted in the story of God’s redemption for Israel and God’s words spoken through the prophets.

<<Music: “Building Up a New World,” 1st verse, fade out under opening sentence.>>

<<“We are building up a new world, builders must be strong.”>>

Just this month, grassroots organizations here in my home state of Tennessee coordinated a faith-based strategy petitioning our Christian governor to accept refugee placements under the Executive Order on Enhancing State and Local Involvement in Refugee Resettlement. This order requires states to *opt-in* to accepting legal immigrants who have documented and accepted refugee status in our country.

We know that the executive branch of our federal government is making xenophobia and racism normative. We hear a constant story of scarcity, fear of difference, hatred of poverty, and desire to control. In the midst of this cruelty and self preservation, advocate to welcome folks who, like the holy family, flee from danger.

As the global immigration crisis continues, we are called to do our part to take responsibility for our country's contributions to it. We are called to become agents of radical hospitality instead of hostility. As children continue to die at our country's southern border, incarcerated and neglected, we are called to see every immigrant and refugee as an image of Jesus, whose parents ran and fought for him to survive.

This story also offers us some broader wisdom. I want to name that for our intended podcast audience, white people working against white supremacy, the Magi offer a particularly interesting invitation that I find to be empowering and accessible.

Now, these folks didn't necessarily have a stake in what was unfolding in Judea. Their position and privilege could have allowed them to opt out of engaging. But they still give an example of some tools and wisdom that are available to our work today, by choosing to be a part of this story.

First of all, the magi were not fighters. They were not equipped to go head to head with Rome; they weren't in a fair fight with Herod's power, his armies, his vindictive violence. Often direct resistance isn't possible or prudent, and we might feel so outmatched that to go up against systems of oppression in obvious confrontational ways is so costly as to be ineffective.

But the Magi offer three important actions.

First, the magi told the truth. They named a new king, and were unapologetic in seeking an alternative way of power. They named the need for new power. Their call to seek the new King offered possibility of an alternative to the existing corrupt and cruel authority.

Second, the magi paid homage. Their act of honoring and giving gifts to Jesus was a political act. It shows discerned and humble recognition of the dignity of those who are oppressed. It shows discerned and humble recognition that God is powerfully present in unexpected places. To leverage power and resources in support of those without is a form of resistance. To pause, to honor those living and leading the struggle is a form of resistance.

Finally, the magi refuse to be complicit in oppression, even at the cost of certainly inconvenience and possibly risk of being targeted by the oppressor. They refused to believe the lie of self-preservation that keeps empire going. They went out of their way to refuse assistance to evil. Perhaps they had some inkling of the violence to come, but whether or not that was part of their divine warning, they discerned Herod's evil intent and refused to be intimidated into supporting it.

So friends, look for ways to take action on behalf of those fleeing the Herods of this world. May you receive the resistance wisdom of the magi. May you be strong to tell the truth. May you be humble to pay homage. May you be brave to refuse to benefit from oppression. And the

blessing of God our liberator, the parent, the child, and the Holy Spirit, be among you and remain with you always.

Thank you for joining us today.

You can find out more about SURJ at [showingupforracialjustice.org](http://showingupforracialjustice.org). Our podcast lives at Soundcloud; search "The Word Is Resistance." Our transcript will include all the exegetical resources I used today and a few other resources as well. Check us out on Facebook and Twitter, or join the conversation by commenting on Soundcloud. Next week we will hear from Will Green. Thanks as always to Max, for your great work sound editing.

Peace be with you.

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