

## Podcast Transcript

1.8.2023 Epiphany

- [Isaiah 60:1-6](#)
- [Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14](#)
- [Ephesians 3:1-12](#)
- [Matthew 2:1-12](#)

<<Music: “Building Up a New World,” 1st verse, fade out under opening sentence.>>  
 <<“We are building up a new world, builders must be strong.”>>

### Intro:

- Hello everyone, welcome back to “The Word is Resistance,” the podcast where we’re exploring what our Christian sacred texts have to teach us about living, surviving, even thriving in the context of empire, tyranny, violence, and repression - the times in which we are living today. What do our sacred stories have to teach us, as white people, about our role in resistance, in showing up, in liberation?
- Our theme music, *We are building up a new world* Dr. Vincent Harding’s song for the freedom movement sung by a multi-racial “movement choir practice in Denver CO in December 2014. It was led by Minister Daryl J. Walker. We are deeply grateful to the Freeney-Harding family for letting us use the song for this podcast.
- I’m Rev. Jean Jeffress. I’m a pastor in the United Church of Christ in Northern CA serving in what’s called the South Bay aka Silicon Valley. I live in the city of Oakland in what is in called the East Bay – both the South Bay and the East Bay exist on the unseated and ancestral lands of the Ohlone people. This podcast is a project of SURJ-Faith and is particularly designed for white people, white Christians – the idea is that white people will talk to other white people about race and white supremacy. We believe white people like many of you listening now, and like me, have a responsibility to commit ourselves to *resisting* white supremacy, to speaking up and showing up and disrupting white supremacy where we find it, including in our own Christian tradition. We’d love to hear from you and especially from people of color, and from listeners all faith traditions who might be checking us out. We’d love to hear how you think we’re doing.
- The Word is Resistance.

Two years ago on this day, January 6, 2021, supporters of the former occupant of the Whitehouse were rioting outside the nation’s capital, smashing shit, breaking windows and beating up police officers. The January 6 riots and attempted interruption of the certification of the presidential vote ensuring the peaceful transfer of power from one president to the next was, most assuredly an attack on democracy in America, such as it is, and dry run for those who would launch political violence as a means of winning elections and governing. Some of those people are elected officials.

What is interesting, and perhaps frightening, is that the riot and attempted coup on January 6, 2021, was motivated and powered by a story – the story that the 2020 election was stolen. The former occupant of the Whitehouse started this story before the election even happened. The

former occupant said he would not accept the election results if they were fraudulent, you know, if he didn't win. Now, I know that is a simplified analysis and I did not do research into the 2020 election for this episode. But he did say that he would not accept the results and that statement blew wind into the sails of the Stop the Steal movement which organized into a riot where people actually died. And the riot, in its full and terrible glory, was an amalgamation of several stories, some of them infinitely more bizarre than the lie of a stolen election.

But the point that I'm trying to make, if it isn't obvious, is that stories are powerful. We are a people of stories. We are ruled by stories even if we don't admit it. In the western world, we like to think that we are ruled by history, by what actually happened, or what can be proved. History is important; what actually happened is important, facts are important, but stories are what we remember – stories are what we are made of.

Today's passage from the gospel of Matthew is a story that has been remembered throughout the ages. There is no way to know if it's historically accurate, but that doesn't keep us from finding some truth.

*<<Music interlude, verse 2 of "Building Up a New World.">>  
<< "Courage, sisters, brothers, people: don't get weary, though the way be long.">>*

Here's the passage from Matthew 2:1-12:

**2** In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup> 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." <sup>3</sup> When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; <sup>4</sup> and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. <sup>5</sup> They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

<sup>6</sup> 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for from you shall come a ruler  
who is to shepherd my people Israel.' "

<sup>7</sup> Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup> Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage."

<sup>9</sup> When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. <sup>10</sup> When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. <sup>11</sup> On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. <sup>12</sup> And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

As far as I knew, until about 2 weeks ago, the story of the Magi could only be found in the gospel of Matthew. Our gospels give us 2 birth stories, one in Luke and one in Matthew. In Luke we get shepherds and angels; in Matthew we get Magi. In every Christmas pageant and nativity

scene we get both, which I think is cool. It's another story. In Matthew, for some reason, the author needs these mysterious, interesting, magical people – these “wise men from the East” to make their point about who Jesus is. In his book, *The Magi: Who They Were, How They've Been Remembered, and Why They Still Fascinate*, Eric Vanden Eykel points out that the lengthy genealogy at the beginning of the gospel of Matthew – the thing probably most of us don't read because it's advance Bible nerdery – Vanden Eykel points out that that genealogy makes sure that we understand that Jesus is in the line of King David. I've always thought of the gospel of Matthew as presenting Jesus as a new Moses, which I think is also true. But Vanden Eykel swayed me with his argument about Jesus also being a new David, a new king. Now, there is all manner of theological and hermeneutical gymnastics we have to do to make Jesus both the Son of God and a king in the line of David but maybe I'll argue that case in another episode. For now, I'm following Matthew's urge to make Jesus a Davidic king.

Since the author of Matthew puts Jesus in the line of David, as a new king, then it's important to somehow include Herod. So, Matthew sends the Magi directly to Herod of whom Vanden Eykel writes, “Historians often portray Herod the Great as a “puppet king.” He goes on to say “Josephus [first century Jewish historian], tells us that not long after [Herod the Great] was put in control of Judea, the Roman Senate bestowed upon him the more prestigious title “king of the Judeans.” In essence, Herod the Great served at the pleasure of the Roman Empire and almost certainly his power could be revoked at any time. His power was from this world and this world could take it away.

And I think Matthew's point was that Herod knew all too well about his revokable powers. When he hears, from the Magi, about “a child who was born king of the Judeans” he gets it that his power is not god-given – that while he may have been appointed king of the Judeans, he is not the Son of God like Caesar, and he certainly wasn't born king of the Judeans. In short, Herod is not pleased. Now, there is also all manner of problems and issues with people being born into monarchical power, but that is also not a case I'll be arguing in this episode. Bear with me.

Matthew needs Jesus to be in the line of David. Okay. I accept that right now. But why did they need [I'm giving Matthew they/them pronouns] why did they need the Magi? I mean, we have the genealogy; we have Davidic covenant itself, promising a king in the line of David forever. Why did they need, basically, magic guys from the East to make this point? It's all about the story.

As I was saying before, until about 2 weeks ago, I thought the story of the Magi was only in Matthew. But in Vanden Eykel's book, he outlines 4 apocryphal texts that also tell a story about the Magi. I can't unpack each story here, but if you want to nerd out on them, they are the *Protevangelium of James*, *Pseudo-Matthew*, *Armenian Gospel of the Infancy*, and *The Revelation of the Magi*.

They are all stories about people journeying from the East. They differ in ways from one another but, in the context of a first century Palestine story, they are all political. And they all seek to name and dismantle the illegitimate power of oppressive empires and their violence. They don't explicitly say that, but when you have people approaching the sitting appointed king asking where is the one who will be born king, you have a story about resistance. And I think the

answer to the question why did Matthew need Magi, and I'm just making this up, but I think they needed the Magi because occupied Judeans would not have been able to approach Herod. The story needed educated, magical, important people from somewhere far away to approach Herod. And it's terrible because the Magi was the literary tool needed in the story for Herod to show is his true brutal, paranoid, murderous self with the Slaughter of the Innocents. The Magi were the literary tool Matthew needed to unseat King Herod in the hearts of their audience. The Magi were the literary tool that allowed Matthew's birth narrative to be deeply, politically subversive.

Even wise men from the East, who don't live under Roman occupation – who aren't ruled by a tyrant, puppet king can recognize illegitimate, frighteningly precarious, revokable power when they see it. They were searching for power that was not from this world – the power of God's love, fiercely vulnerable and freshly arrived in an unimportant place to unimportant people. Power that the world cannot revoke or kill to people without much to lose. That's the kind of power we tell stories about for thousands of years. Literally.

*<<Music interlude, verse 2 of "Building Up a New World.">>  
<< "Courage, sisters, brothers, people: don't get weary, though the way be long.">>*

Which brings us back to today, January 6, 2023. The story that fueled the deadly riots of 2 years ago was a powerful story. It was also a story about someone trying to hang onto power. And the story that fueled the deadly riots was fueled by another story – the story of who gets to have power in our nation. The history of this nation is one of fighting for and winning freedom, of building a nation from the ground up, of founding fathers, of forming a democracy, or liberty and justice for all. But the story of this nation is wealth built on slave labor and stolen land, of genocide and kidnapping, of Jim Crow and mass incarceration. We have a lot to answer for. It's our time and our responsibility as white people to own this whole story so that we can write a new ending. White supremacy is illegitimate power, and whether we are seeing the death throws of the power of white supremacy or the birth pains of an even stronger resurgence, I don't know. But everybody knows it's illegitimate and revokable. And like Herod and all of Jerusalem with him, those who wish to uphold it are frightened.

We are the story-makers. And like the Magi, we can seek the legitimate, unrevokable power of love; we can seek to name and dismantle tyranny; we can be the ones who change the story.

*<<Music interlude, verse 2 of "Building Up a New World.">>  
<< "Courage, sisters, brothers, people: don't get weary, though the way be long.">>*

My call to action this week is to give to do one small thing to change the story in your own context and circle of influence to promote justice. I got this idea from my friend Sandhya Jha's newsletter called "Joy in Social Justice." I'll include a link in the transcript. Here are her ideas:

- "Once a day, I can be really conscious of the fact that my morning tea is fair trade and spend a moment reflecting on other ways I can support workers throughout the day.
- Once a week, I can share a story with colleagues about something equity-related in the news.

- Once a month, I can mention to a colleague (a different one each month) a simple workplace practice to increase justice, whether that's a way of tweaking job searches to increase the number of LGBTQ applicants, or exploring family leave policies that better support pregnant people and people who take care of elders, or using best practices to strengthen the advancement pipeline for Black people and other people of color. (This [newsletter archive](#) has some really simple practices to engage in the workplace!)”

Thank you so much for joining me from wherever you are in this world today. Let us know how your action goes – we’d love to hear from you all – by commenting on our Soundcloud, Twitter or Facebook pages. Tune in for a resistance word from Rev. Sarah Howell-Miller.

You can find out more about SURJ at [surj.org](http://surj.org), and our podcast lives at Soundcloud; search on “The Word Is Resistance.” We’re also on Spotify. Give us a “like” or rate us on iTunes, Stitcher, or wherever you listen to your podcasts. Transcripts are available as well on our website, which include references, resources, and action links. Finally, a huge thanks as always to our sound editor this week, Claire Hitchins! Thank you, Claire!!

(Words of blessing/encouragement)

- Blessings to you in all that you do.
- Love and liberation to you all
- Until next time. I’m Jean Jeffress.

<<Verse 3 of “Building Up A New World, Verse 1 repeated.>>  
 <<“Rise, Shine, Give God glory, Children of the Light”  
 We are building up a new world, builders must be strong.>>

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## RESOURCES

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Homebrewed Christianity Podcast – interview with Eric Vanden Eykel

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Vanden Eykel, Eric. *The Magi: Who They Were, How They're Remembered, and Why They Still Fascinate*. Forest Press. 2022

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