

Podcast Transcript

1.1.2023 and Christmas 1A

- 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.”>>

[Intro and Transition:]

[Intro:]

- Hi everyone. Welcome back to The Word Is Resistance, the podcast where we’re exploring what Christian sacred texts have to teach us about living, surviving, even thriving in the context of empire, tyranny, violence, and repression - the context in which we are living today. Through Christian scripture and our various traditions, what support can we gather, especially as white folks, in finding our mutual interest in movements for liberation?
- My name is Rev. Liz Kearny. My pronouns are she/her.
I am an ordained Presbyterian Church U.S.A. pastor and hospital chaplain serving on the occupied ancestral homelands of the Cowlitz Indian Tribe in so-called Longview, Washington. I’m a member of the SURJ Faith organizing team and I’m feeling so grateful to be joining you for my 2nd podcast as a member of The Word Is Resistance podcast team!
- This podcast is a project of SURJ Faith and is particularly designed for white Christians—white Christians talking to other white Christians about race and white supremacy. We believe white Christians have a responsibility to commit ourselves to resisting white supremacy, to speaking up and showing up and disrupting white supremacy where we find it, especially through the Christian tradition.
- 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.

[Transition:]

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

[Main Content:]

Today, we'll be spending some time with the Gospel text for this Sunday, January 1st, 2023 the first Sunday after Christmas in year A of the Revised Common Lectionary. The passage in the lectionary is Matthew 2:13-23, but I've taken the liberty of including the rest of the chapter that comes before verse 13 because I think reading this whole narrative section will help us locate ourselves in this story of political leaders, travelers, and parents who are all making decisions about which kind of world they want to build. Remember to engage with the characters in this story not as two-dimensional cartoons on an old Sunday school flannel graph, but rather as living breathing children of God, with bodies and histories and challenges like ours. White supremacy culture wants us to sort people into two categories - the good ones and the bad ones. Let's resist that binary culture and instead, get curious - looking for ourselves in their stories.

Before we dive in, I'd invite you to connect to your breath along with me. If you can, put your feet flat on the ground. Without changing it, notice the air going in and out of your body. As we inhale, we will pray, "My body is precious." As we exhale, we will pray, "I belong in God's story."

Breath in: My body is precious.

Breath out: I belong in God's story.

Breath in: My body is precious.

Breath out: I belong in God's story.

Breath in: My body is precious.

Breath out: I belong in God's story.

I invite you to open your hearts along with mine as we get swept up in this narrative that includes both the hope and the violence of our own world within it...

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.' ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶ "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." '

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then 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.'

9When 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. 10When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 11On 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. 12And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road. 13 Now after they 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.' 14Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, 15and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.'

16 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 who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. 17Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

18 '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.'

19 When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, 20'Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead.' 21Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. 22But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. 23There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, 'He will be called a Nazorean.'

This is the Word of God. Thanks be to God.

- There are two worlds colliding in this text. There's the world of the Roman empire, in which a few hoard all the resources at the expense of the many who suffer from human-created scarcity. And there's Christ's kin-dom, quite literally dawning with the rising star, bubbling up from below and born as a vulnerable baby. The people we read about here - King Herod, the magi, Joseph and Mary, the people of Egypt, those living in Jerusalem under Herod's rule - let's imagine that no choice they make in this story is a foregone conclusion. In each moment, they are making decisions, big and small - Will I be complicit with empire? Or will I risk building a new world along with God? As

movement leader adrienne maree brown puts it, “What we pay attention to grows.”¹

Today’s text is an invitation for us to feel what each of these characters might have been feeling and ask ourselves, especially if we are white Christians - which world will I choose? What will I pay attention to? What will I help grow?

- Let’s start with King Herod. Again, let’s let go of the flattened image of him as a movie villain and allow him to be a person like us making choices. I’ve noticed that I feel an inner urge to throw people away when I see qualities in them that I’m afraid could appear in my own life. But in the world we want to build together, full of community care and free from punishment, no one is disposable. So let’s practice something different here.
- When the magi ask Herod, “‘Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?’” Herod heard this as a direct threat to his political position. After all, *he* had been appointed by Rome to be ruler of the Judeans. And he’d gotten rich in that job. Scholar Thomas Bohache points out in *The Queer Bible Commentary* that inscriptions from the time Herod was alive showed that he had “adopted for himself such titles as ‘Admirer of Caesar’ and ‘Admirer of the Romans’ [with] his admiration [taking] the form of massive building projects in every portion of his realm, including monuments and entire cities in honour of Caesar...” And where did all the money come from to pay for that? Bohache says these projects were “financed... on the backs of his Jewish subjects, who were taxed outrageously” to foot the bill. This kind of taxation is likely the reason Joseph and Mary had to make the treacherous journey to Bethlehem in the first place, so they could be enrolled to pay a head tax to the empire. Bohache says that the “Jewish people themselves suffered from overcrowding in the towns, exhaustion of the land due to overplanting, famine, poverty, disease and drought. Under the socioeconomic system in place during the Roman empire, it is estimated,” Bohache writes, “that the imperial governors and the local aristocracy... made up the smallest portion of the population, yet consumed the majority of the resources; the peasants, artisans and landless poor made up the vast majority of the population...”² Sound familiar? It brings to mind the ways I rely on corporations like Amazon for same-day Christmas present shipping, which makes Jeff Bezos richer and richer even as Amazon warehouse workers are continually exposed to COVID and other unsafe working conditions so that I never need to slow down my consumption.³ It reminds me of how my own pension through the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is still invested in fossil fuels, funding my future retirement while BIPOC communities already targeted by systems of oppression are the first to suffer in floods,

¹ adrienne maree brown, “attention liberation: a commitment, a year of practice,” January 1, 2018, <https://adriennemareebrown.net/2018/01/01/attention-liberation-a-commitment-a-year-of-practice/>

² Thomas Bohache, “Matthew,” *The Queer Bible Commentary*, edited by Deryn Guest, Robert E Goss, Mona West, Thomas Bohache (2006), pg. 496-7.

³ Annie Palmer, “Amazon settles with California over claims it concealed Covid-19 cases from warehouse workers,” November 15th, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/11/15/amazon-settles-claims-it-concealed-covid-19-cases-from-workers.html>

fires, and droughts that come along with climate change.⁴ In lots of ways, Herod's situation is my own.

- And much like today, Herod relied on armed forces to keep this oppressive economic system in place. Bohache writes that “Herod, in fact, instituted what today would be called a police-state, complete with loyalty oaths, surveillance, informers, secret police, imprisonment, torture, and brutal retaliation.” It’s a similar system to the one I see in my own community, where the same casual rolling through a stop sign is left alone by the cops in my wealthier part of town, while leading to sirens and a police search in vehicles on the other side of the lake, a neighborhood that has been under-invested in by local government for decades.
- And as we see in the story today, none of Herod’s reliance on the police made him feel secure in the end. Herod’s paranoia about those who might threaten his power was notorious, in fact, leading him to become “responsible for the deaths of his brothers, his mother, at least one of his wives and several of his sons.”⁵ We may not be murdering our own family members because of our continued fear, but it’s worth asking: Has the continued expansion of police budgets all across this country made *you* feel like your community is truly safe, having all it needs to thrive?
- The text tells us that when Herod first heard from the magi about this new king they were coming to worship, he was “frightened” - a passive form of the Greek verb *tarassō*, which can mean “to agitate, trouble (a thing, by the movement of its parts to and fro).”⁶ At least for me, it isn’t hard to think of the times when my inner being has been moved to and fro with fear of the power structure I am familiar with changing. Having grown up in a wealthy, mostly white community, I generally felt safer when a cop car pulled up, subconsciously confident that that police officer was there to protect my interests as a white person in a wealthy, property-owning family. So when I first heard about calls to defund and abolish the police, my first reaction was to feel anxiety radiate throughout my nervous system. If we don’t give power to police to “serve and protect”, I wondered, what will we have to keep us safe?
- I wonder what might have happened if Herod had slowed down long enough to tune into the fear he was feeling in his body? Might the question from the magi have been an invitation to explore a new way of being, enfleshed in this little baby being born? Could he have started taking action that very day to turn around and walk in a new direction of solidarity with the very people he had been getting rich by oppressing? The fight / flight /

⁴ “EPA Report Shows Disproportionate Impacts of Climate Change on Socially Vulnerable Populations in the United States,” September 2nd, 2021,

<https://www.epa.gov/newsreleases/epa-report-shows-disproportionate-impacts-climate-change-socially-vulnerable>

⁵ Thomas Bohache, “Matthew,” *The Queer Bible Commentary*, edited by Deryn Guest, Robert E Goss, Mona West, Thomas Bohache, pg. 497.

⁶ “Lexicon :: Strong's G5015 - tarassō”, <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g5015/rsv/mgnt/0-1/>

freeze response we feel in our bodies when we get scared does not have to lead us to punishing responses that only escalate the harm around us. What if each moment of fear is actually a moment of possibility where we can slow down and intentionally decide to participate in the new world that is already on its way? What if, especially for white folx, the resistance we may feel in our bodies to the idea of abolishing the police could lead us into humble curiosity about the generations-long abolition movement that has always been creating alternative forms of safety outside of the state?

- Ok, now let's turn our attention to the magi. We don't have a way to know their precise identities, but scholars seem to think that they were some mixture of astrologers, wise folx, magicians, and seers who advised their own royalty back home. Bohache says that they were likely from "the Parthian empire, Rome's enemy to the east of Palestine, against whom Herod and his successors guarded the frontiers on Rome's behalf."⁷ The writers at *enfleshed* tell us that the magi "had something in common with the Jewish people of Bethlehem. They too were living in a land where foreign people had colonized their territories and they shared the desire to overthrow western imperialism. Their longing for liberation and the liberation of their people," the theologians at *enfleshed* write, "led them to cross over borders into a new territory - one where they would find shared desire for change among a similarly oppressed people."⁸
- Just like it was not a foregone conclusion that Herod would respond to news of Jesus' birth with horrific violence, let's not assume that the magi were just doing what anyone would do in their position. The risks they took, y'all! How easy it would have been for them to stay home! But instead, they left their homes in search of people to co-labor for freedom with, across a boundary that sounds like it might have been as heavily policed as our own border. Maybe they had heard about the Jewish people suffering under Roman occupation and saw in that struggle something of their own. Perhaps that is what drove them to take their lives into their hands, following their sources of wisdom with hope in their chests for the dawning of a new order, one ruled not by the crushing forces used to keep the poor at bay, but by love, compassion, and mutual care. Whatever privileges they had in their home community, they used them to build a coalition-across-boundaries with Mary, Joseph, and little Jesus. Not out of a short-lived guilt about their privilege, but rather because they had identified their own stake in the freedom of their neighbors. They realized what white folx today need to embrace for all creation to thrive, that (in the words of SURJ Executive Director Erin Heaney), "White privilege is real, but it's not an organizing strategy."⁹ Finding our mutual interest in one another's liberation, however, is.

⁷ Thomas Bohache, "Matthew," *The Queer Bible Commentary*, edited by Deryn Guest, Robert E Goss, Mona West, Thomas Bohache, pg. 497.

⁸ "Liturgy that matters - Matthew 2:1-12, *Enfleshed: Bringing what matters back to the gospel for justice, liberation, and delight*", January 6, 2019, pg. 3, enfleshed.com

⁹ Erin Heaney tweet from 10:41 AM on July 27th, 2022, https://twitter.com/heaney_erin/status/1552348394882048002

- This exercise of slowing down with each character in this story could continue for each one of us. What if you sat with the Jewish folx living in Jerusalem, fearful of the explosive rage of King Herod but surely also asking themselves, “What is my role to play in resisting the supremacy culture that keeps me bound as well?” What if you imagined what it would be like to be part of one of the Jewish communities in Egypt during this time, like Alexandria, known during this period for receiving refugee families like Mary, Joseph and Jesus?¹⁰ What would have happened if they had hoarded their resources instead of sharing them to make a home for the holy family in those first years of Jesus’ life? What motivated them to open their homes to these folx fleeing violence?
- There are not good people and bad people. We all have the potential to make choices that harm. And we all have the potential to make choices that help life grow. This text invites us to slow down long enough to remember the power of our choices. I love how Ibram X. Kendi puts it in his book *How to Be an Antiracist*: “The good news is that racist and antiracist are not fixed identities. We can be a racist one minute and an antiracist the next. What we say about race, what we do about race, in each moment, determines what — not who — we are.”¹¹
- Beloveds, may the star of liberation that led the magi to God-made-flesh lead you forth. Especially as we enter a new calendar year, may you connect to your breath and remember that it is never too late to resist supremacy culture and try something new. And may you feel a community gather around you as every big and tiny choice adds up to a future of wholeness and abundance for all of us. Amen.

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

[Call to Action and outro:]
 [Call to Action:]

- For our call to action this week, I invite you to spend some time with SURJ Faith’s Community Safety For All Toolkit: A Congregational Action Toolkit To Stop Relying on Police. This is for anyone who is part of a faith community and is wondering, “How can my worshiping community take steps to divest from systems of punishment? How can my faith home participate in building up a world that relies on community care instead of cops, courts, and cages?” In this toolkit you’ll find an incredible gathering of curated resources to help people brand new to police and prison abolition (like I was just a couple years ago!) learn about the white supremacist roots of policing, and how each of our faith

¹⁰ Michael Joseph Brown, “The Gospel of Matthew,” *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary*, Brian K. Blount (General Editor), Cain Hope Felder, Clarice J. Martin, and Emerson B. Powery (Associate Editors), pg. 89.

¹¹ Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, Random House Publishing Group (August 2019), pg. 10.

spaces can practice making new choices that walk all of us in the direction of healing, wholeness, and compassion in our communities. It's a great way to start making choices, big and small, that will liberate all of us, helping us divest from systems of punishment and invest in the things that *actually* keep our communities safe - like affordable housing, accessible healthcare, enough quality food to feed our neighborhoods, and accountability practices that transform harm. Wherever you and your faith community are on the spectrum of exploring abolition, I promise you this toolkit has a place for you and your people to start. Just visit surj.org/our-work/surj-faith. Scroll down a bit and click on the blue text that says "Community Safety For All" and you'll find out how to sign up to receive the toolkit in your email inbox! And don't hesitate to reach out to us if you and some members of your faith community want some accompaniment in implementing this resource where you worship. We'd love to support you in any way we can!

[Outro:]

- Thanks as always for joining us. We'd love to hear from you all, and especially folks of color and non-Christian folks, by commenting on our Soundcloud or Twitter or Facebook pages, or filling out the survey on our podcast page at surj.org. Give us a "like" or rate us on iTunes, Spotify, or wherever you check out our podcast.
- You can find out more about SURJ at surj.org, where you can sign up for SURJ-Faith updates and find transcripts for every episode, which include references, resources, and action links. Next week we'll have a resistance Word from the incredible Rev. Jean Jeffress. And finally, a huge thanks as always to our sound editor, Claire Hitchens! We appreciate you so much!

[Words of blessing/encouragement:]

- Again, my name is Liz Kearny, and it's been a privilege to share a resistance word from the gospel of Matthew with you this week. I want to close with some words from Toi Smith, a growth and impact strategist whose "work centers on doing life and business and motherhood differently." I recently heard a conversation between her and "The Pop-Up Pod" podcast's host Nicole Antoinette all about countercultural and liberatory ways to think and act when it comes to money. Hear now Toi's words about the pathways of possibility that are open to all of us: "I would say that my wish," Toi says, "is that everyone could understand that they are powerful, and they are creators... we have the power both by ourselves, as an individual and as a Collective body to shape and change things, so I don't hold on to the narratives of doom and gloom because at any moment in time, you can decide that you want to use that creativity, that force that no other species

really has to shape change, and so just remember that you are powerful and there's possibility in your fingertips, and we can make moves if we decide to do that.”¹²

<<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:

Michael Joseph Brown, “The Gospel of Matthew,” *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary*, Brian K. Blount (General Editor), Cain Hope Felder, Clarice J. Martin, and Emerson B. Powery (Associate Editors).

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“Community Safety for All: #DefundPolice Congregational Action Toolkit to Stop Relying on Police,” sign up to receive by email at <https://surj.org/our-work/surj-faith/cs4a/>

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¹² Toi Smith quote, transcript for “Toi Smith: If you have a value of liberation, where is your money going to be going?” *The Pop Up Pod*, September 21st 2022, transcript: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5f7ccf52322f237ac7516fb8/t/6329d1d90a1f082a99e4b5f5/1663685081557/Toi+Pop-Up+Pod+-+Toi+Smith.pdf>, pg. 20

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