

A communion meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, January 1, 2012, Christmas 1, dedicated to the 199 Ohioans who died serving our nation in Iraq from March 20, 2003, through December 15, 2011, to all the courageous men, women and children who resist the treachery of the 21st century's "King Herods," and always to the glory of God!

“King Herod’s New Year’s Resolution”

***Isaiah 60:1-6; Ephesians 3:2-3, 5-6;
Matthew 2:1-16***

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Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and salvation. Amen.

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The story of the magi and their magical trip on the trail of starlight is one which captures our human imagination. Poets like Yates and Longfellow, artists like Botticelli and Fra Angelica, operatic composers like Gian Carlo Menotti (*Amahl and the Night Visitors*) and hymn writers like Father John Henry Hopkins, Jr. (*We Three Kings of Orient Are*) have all added details, depth, and imagination which Matthew’s Gospel never gives.

So much has been made of this story about which we know so little.

They were not kings and there were not three of them -at least according to St. Matthew. We do not know who they were, where they came from or how many of them there were (perhaps there were 50). We don't know how long it took them to get to Bethlehem or even how old Jesus was by the time they arrived. We are not even sure about the famous star which they followed through the night sky.

However, the story of the magi is not about facts. It is a story about imagination and following a dream. It is story about star-gazing and star-chasing. This story shows what imagination can do for people.

These magi came from somewhere far away. Let's imagine they had spent their lives looking at stars. They were dreamers, astrologers, astronomers, and philosophers. So, why in the world would they one day decide to actually "follow" one? Something moved each of them out of their safe lives of observation into lives of action. It is safe for us to imagine that each started from different paths. Let's imagine that somewhere outside Jerusalem they bumped into each other. Then piecing their stories together, they discovered they were all following a star. More importantly, they were all in search of a newborn baby who was born to be king.

At this point, the trajectory of following shifts. Evil enters the star-followers path and we see what a twisted, destructive lack of imagination can do to a man obsessed and possessed with his own sense of power. When their stories brought them to the palatial palace of Judea's king (the biggest building by far in Jerusalem), it became clear that the paranoid patriarch who gave himself the title "Herod the Great," was unaware of the one born of royal David's line. It was also clear that he wanted him dead. Herod insisted the magi be his location device (his own personal GPS unit) and let him know where the baby was so he could come and "worship" (I mean "slaughter") him.

Herod had built temples, empires and shrines to himself. Outside of the Pharaoh's of Egypt, he had the largest memorial

in the world built for his burial after death. His epithet of "the Great" was widely disputed for history knew him as "*a madman who murdered his own family and a great many rabbis*" (so wrote Josephus, historian of the times). Hesitantly, the magi backed out of the throne room and back on to the trail.

There, just 6 miles away, they met the newborn king. They see stars in his eyes. They see the light of God in his eyes. They are swept away. They have fallen in love - that love that comes with the first glance, kiss and hold of a newborn. Because of love, they go home by another way. Because of love, they never say a word to Herod about him.

But because of hate, fear and paranoia, Herod the killer King is furious. He is so fearful of this child's starlight that he sends soldiers into Bethlehem and they kill all the children - male and female - under the age of 2. Perhaps 20 or baby boys and girls die because of hatred and fear; we never hear or read again of this slaughter of the holy innocents. But Joseph, having been warned in a dream, escapes to Egypt with Mary and the baby.

Magi and madmen. Dreamers and destroyers. Star-followers and star-slaughters.

History books are filled with the lurid and psychologically twisted tales of all the King Herods. That is how history is told, isn't it? Harder to find are the stories of men, women and children who follow pathways to peace and justice, those who resist and protest the evil deeds and evil doers of this world of ours. Their stories are hidden histories of the truth of every era. We have to hang on to stories of the star-followers and we have to nurture and teach ourselves and our children to see the stars; to reach for the stars; to follow them in the night sky.

2012 is only a few hours old. What will 2012 bring to our world? Some read the stones and the stars of the ancient

Mayan civilization and predict that we have only 354 days left. Others predict this will be one of the most interesting and fascinating years in human history. Following 2011 and the year of "The Protester," (according to *Time* magazine), 2012 could be the year in which the protesters are pushed to produce platforms and peaceful, productive societies.

What started on December 17, 2010, in the small town of Sid Bouzid, Tunisia, when a common street vendor, Mannoubia Bouazizi took his own life after years of police harassment, spread to Tunis, throughout Tunisia and then across to Alexandria's Freedom Square and Cairo's Tahrir Square in Egypt; and then to Syria and Libya and onto Madrid, Athens, London, Tel Aviv and towns and cities in Mexico, India, Chile, Red Square in Moscow, Russia, and finally to Wall Street in New York City, then across all of the United States of America - even to the streets and statehouse grounds of Columbus, Ohio. People's anger and loathing pointed at governments and their cronies across the globe became uncontrollable as it fed on itself (*Time*, December 26, 2011, p.58).

In his tiny book *Time for Outrage (Indignez-vous!)*, 93-year-old Stephane Hessel reflects on a life today as he approaches the end of his life - a life that took him as a Jew from Berlin to Paris, as a spy for the French underground to a prisoner at Buchenwald (where he escaped execution) to De Gaulle's French resistance forces and beyond.

Hessel says we are all called to "**engage**" in this world. He learned this as a student of Jean-Paul Sartre. Hessel writes: "*Sartre taught (me and all of) us that as individuals, we are responsible. . . . (Every human being) must engage. . . . Our humanity depends on it.*" He continues, "*To be engaged, we must feel outraged by what we see as wrong in this world. Otherwise, we will become indifferent and indifference is the worst attitude in the world.*" (Stephane Hessel, *Time for Outrage*, Twelve Hachette Book Group, New York, N.Y., translated by Marion Duvert, pp.11-12).

Hessel calls us to follow a star for our times. That star is the nonviolent reconciliation in the clashes between cultures and races and nations of people.

Hessel believes that whenever and however violence manifests itself it points to failure and we must learn, treasure, follow and practice the ways of nonviolence to turn the failure of violence into success for nonviolence. Success won't happen unless we engage and challenge the violence. And while it may be costly, it is the only way. Hessel posits that while Sartre wrote of the value of terror, he recanted and wrote weeks before the end of his life, "*Hope has always been the dominant force of revolutions and insurrections. . . . I continue to hold hope as my conception of the future.*" (Ibid, p.24)

This is a year that will not bring the end of time. I am convinced of that. So is my brother-in-law, Dr. Robert Sitler. Bob is a Latin America scholar, Spanish professor and a Mayan scholar. He has written a book released in 2011, entitled: *Living Maya: Ancient Wisdom in the Era of 2012*. Having lived and worked with the Maya across the past 35 years, Bob believes the genius of Mayan culture and people comes from their simplicity and closeness to the earth. Their care for their elders and children, the earth and all of creation is amazing, says Bob. The further we get from earth consciousness and simplicity, the closer we come to our own demise as civilization. The Mayans don't predict the end of the world; they do believe we have the whole world in our hands. Perhaps we can learn from the Mayans as Christians and as global citizens to live more peacefully and more simply in order to simply live.

King Herod really only had one New Year's resolution 2,012 years ago. He was resolved to extinguish the Light of the World. He was determined to kill the newborn King. He wanted to kill hope. He was committed to destroy love. Herod failed. Although the King Herods of this world have come close to killing hope and love through two millennium since

then, they still stalk the world and threaten the newborns (although four “Herods” died or were killed in 2012).

The question for us becomes - what will our New Year’s resolution be for 2012? We know grandiose resolutions always fail. May I suggest four peaceful resolutions for nonviolent insurrections and engagement against violence and evil. They may seem grandiose, but if we engage them, we will succeed in fulfilling them.

1. Study Gandhi, King, Shuttlesworth and learn the way of nonviolent resistance. As individuals and as a congregation, make a commitment to be a center of nonviolent resistance.
2. Study the United Nations Charter of Human Rights and as a church we can make a commitment to sign on with the charter, now more than 60 years old.
3. Make conscious and clear commitments and small steps to engage the violence of this world through nonviolent resistance. Start in your relationships, in your homes, in your neighborhoods, in this church and in our city.
4. Find one place where you can engage those who are victims of violence in our times. We know young victims of violence, often become violent victimizers. We need to dedicate ourselves to engage them in nonviolent, healing and healthy ways.

We are people who follow Star Light and ultimately the Light of the World. How will we resolve to counteract and challenge the King Herods of our times and be “the Light Shine” for a new day?

Let’s use our imagination and follow the starlight, the Christ light!

Then we can join with others in our times and say, “*To create is to resist. To resist is to create.*” Let’s call this, the “Way of the Magi.” If that doesn’t work for you, you can call it

“the way of Christ” - for that is what it really is. Amen.

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