



# CALVARY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

## **The Feast of the Epiphany** **January 6, 2019** **The Rev. Scott Walters**

On Monday afternoon, I managed to wrench myself from Facebook for an hour where the gripping journey of the Calvary magi through Memphis has been documented for the past 12 days. We were listening to a podcast in the car that contained a description of a curious library in a novel that I've never read. I just wanted you to be reassured that the meticulous research you've come to expect in these sermons would continue at least one Sunday into 2019.

The podcast is called *This American Life* and the novel was by Richard Brautigan, who is best known for his book *Trout Fishing in America*, which holds the distinction of being the only novel ever to end with the word "mayonnaise." I did read a moldy paperback copy of that book once upon a time. Which may be why the story about the library caught my attention.

The library in the other Brautigan book, whose title I'm not going to mention because it's not nearly as nice as *Trout Fishing in America*, is a very different kind of library.

For one thing, it never closes, even though it is staffed by a single librarian, who is present at the circulation desk at all times, day and night. A man whose appearance says, "My clothes are not expensive but they are friendly and neat and my human presence is welcoming."

But what makes the library he tends unique is that it's not a place where you go to check out books other people have written. It's a library where the unpublished manuscripts of the rest of us are taken in and given a home. Forever. Whether anyone else ever reads them or not. It's a place where that nagging fear that I've got nothing of value to say to the world gets no traction. It's a place where your gift is always welcome. Welcome not because it's perfect, but because it's yours.

One chapter is titled "The 23," and it consists entirely of the librarian's ledger entries for the 23 titles patrons dropped off on one particular day. There was a sci-fi novel by a sewer worker called *It's the Queen of Darkness, Pal*. And a book called *Leather Clothes and the History of Man*, which was somehow made entirely of leather. Not just the binding, but the pages. Of a book titled *Bacon Death*, by one Marcia Patterson, the librarian's entry states, "The author was a totally nondescript young woman except for the look of anguish on her face. She handed me this fantastically greasy book and fled the library in terror. The book actually looked like a pound of bacon."

What a wild, unworkable, but incredibly hopeful idea to base a library upon. Not the idea that we're all lacking knowledge and that there is so much information out there that we fear we'll never take in enough of it to be made whole. But that each of us is gifted. That there really ought to be a place where what your life has to offer is welcomed and honored. A shelf where the gift of your peculiar story is given its place and maybe even tended to by a man whose clothes are not expensive but they are friendly and neat and whose human presence is welcoming.

The gifts of the magi are maybe the most famous gifts in the Western world. Gold. Frankincense. Myrrh. Is there anywhere else in your life where you've ever heard mention of myrrh? And, yet, even if we mistakenly situate these wise men at the stable in creches and Christmas pageants everywhere, we do know from myrrh, right? We remember the gifts.

Plenty of Epiphany sermons have been preached on what each gift might symbolize: gold for a king, frankincense for a god, myrrh for a burial anointing. But what I'd like us to wonder on today is the inverted idea that the appearance of Christ in the world doesn't just give us something we didn't have before. It draws gifts out of the unlikeliest people. It's the establishment, or the uncovering of a realm in which giftedness rules, not fear. It's a realm established by grace, not violence and worldly power.

The story begins and ends with the chilling reminder that things were as they've always been in the world. For one, it was ruled by violence and fear. Herod is afraid. Herod, and "all Jerusalem with him," is what the text says. Everyone was afraid. Fear, one might say, is what made this world go 'round.

Stanley Hauerwas reminds us that Herods are rarely as powerful as they think they are. And this contributes to the power of fear in the worlds they rule. Herod, you see, is a so called king, not because he is an all powerful monarch. He's been appointed only because Rome wants him to bring a little order to this unruly little corner of the empire. He's a pawn. Powerful only as long as he's useful to the powers above him.

He knows this. Rome knows this. Everyone knows that fear of failure and the consequences that would follow are what keep the Pax Romana alive.

Remember. This is an administration that hangs the worst insurrectionists on crosses out in public to be a lesson to anyone else who might question who's really in charge.

Such is the world the wise men from the East enter when their astrological systems somehow let them know that a different kind of king has been born. And so they go.

Herod, who is a Roman pawn, understands intimately how helpful pawns can be, so he cleverly decides to put these foreigners to use. He'll have them track down the newborn threat to his reign so that he can do away with it. Herod stays in power by fearing all threats and using whatever means he has at his disposal to dispose of what's threatening.

But what's so beautiful about this story is that the part of the journey we hear about is not the wise men's trip from some far away place to Judea. The leg of the journey we read of begins in Jerusalem — from Herod's palace, even — and continues from there on to Bethlehem.

In other words, the journey we actually read about takes place entirely within Herod's realm of fear. They don't travel out beyond where Herod is in charge. Maybe there's always a Herod in charge. What they travel to is Jesus, who is in Bethlehem. Smack in the middle of Herod's country. The reign of God isn't found in some pristine, otherworldly, perfect land, free of fear. It's to be found right under Herod's nervous nose.

"Repent!" John the Baptist will announce in the very next scene, "The kingdom of heaven has drawn near!" In other words, "Turn around. The kingdom of heaven is over here, with this poor mother and her carpenter husband. Turn around. Herod and all of Jerusalem may well be afraid. But here, in this child, gifts are drawn out even of strange foreigners and joy — not fear, overwhelming joy — is what spills out."

Maybe that's why Jesus will keep associating with the outcast, with strangers and sinners, with the unclean and with powerless ones. Maybe our deepest fears come not from worry about not having enough, but from being afraid of losing what we have. People who can lose their lives come to life in Jesus's kingdom. Maybe the magi were the first ones on the gospel scene to save their lives by giving them away.

For all the people who will come to Jesus for answers or insight or healing, these three foreigners came to him expecting nothing more than to lay down their gifts and give thanks. In this, they may have looked more like Jesus himself than anyone else in the whole gospel story.

I wish this story were a little less relevant right now. We read the headlines each morning and realize we've heard it all before. People in power are still scared of losing that power and so they use fear to keep the rest of us in line. We're told to fear immigrants and poor people. We're told to fear conservatives and liberals, to fear anybody on the other side of anything. We're told to fear market fluctuations and interest rate hikes and cryptocurrencies and people from the Far East who aren't buying enough of our iPhones.

Fear still rules. And, as Christians, we should be clear that Epiphany is, at its heart, a political story. Being faithful to it has required Christians in all sorts of realms to refuse to bow to the reign of fear. It will require such refusals from us in our time as well.

But the way Jesus and these magi resist Herod is not to build up enough good guy power to make the king's knees go weak. They resist him by refusing to be driven by what drives him. The magi hear Herod out. And then they continue on their way toward Jesus, changing course only when God leads them home by another road.

Unfortunately, from time to time even Jesus's church has let fear drive what we do and determine how we live out the good news. But if we see our spiritual work as having our

lives be guided by a different star, one of grace and of the giftedness of all people instead of that dark star of fear, we can be a different kind of community.

We won't be a community where no one is ever afraid. But we could be a people who've agreed, in Jesus's name, not to let our fears determine who we are and what God is calling us to in this life. A place where fear is overcome by expectant joy, like that of those magi at the sight of their infant king.

Maybe the Church, then, is meant to be a kind of Brautigan Library for our souls. A great and welcoming room where there's a place on the shelf for every last human story that ever was. A place where it's assumed that, whoever you are, and wherever you come from, and maybe even whatever you believe, your presence here is a gift to us, not a threat. Because by the star that lights our way, your life bears something of God into the world that the world has not yet seen.