

# WORSHIP

Sermon | 1.3.2021



## Rooted in Tradition: Revealing Truth

The Reverend Pen Peery

Matthew 2:1-12

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.

They told him, ‘In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:  
“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.” ’



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

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. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.

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. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

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Today we begin a sermon series called "Rooted in Tradition" where we will reflect on Scriptures that illumine the Great Ends of the Church. This year marks our congregation's bicentennial – and we thought a great way to enter into a time when we will celebrate our history and consider what God has in store for our future – would be to take stock of what our purpose is...or, maybe more accurately, what God's purpose is with the church.

More than 100 years ago, the Presbyterian Church articulated six "Ends" – or vision statements – to guide our ministry in a changing world. These aspirational



statements outline our church's reason for existence – and broadly lay out what work we are called to do as the body of Christ.

You'll hear more about these in the coming weeks – both through our Pathways to Discipleship classes and in worship – but here they are:

The proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind

The shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God

The maintenance of divine worship

The preservation of the truth

The promotion of social righteousness

The exhibition of the kingdom of heaven to the world

Today I will be exploring “the preservation of the truth” – and reflecting on a familiar part of Scripture where we find Magi arriving from a distant land to discover a child who had been born a king.

I am reading from the second chapter of Matthew's gospel. Listen with me for a word from God.

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Traditionally, the church reads this Scripture on January 6 – the 12<sup>th</sup> day of Christmas, which is called Epiphany. Epiphany means “manifestation,” or,



“showing.” More colloquially, it means “the moment of recognition,” or “an awareness of the truth.”

What is so interesting about the way Matthew tells the story about God coming into the world in the person of Jesus Christ is that it takes a little while for God’s people to register their epiphany about Jesus. In fact, it took strangers – people outside the fold – to connect the dots and shed light on what was really going on with this child born of Mary.

In Christmas pageants, we call them the Three Wise Men.

As a point of fact – I’m sorry to burst your bubble – we’re actually not sure they were three. Or wise. Or men.

We number them as three because of the gifts they brought – the gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

We say they were wise because they knew something about astrology.

We say they were men because...well, men wrote the history back then and tended to give themselves more credit than they sometimes deserved.

What we **do** know about these magi from the East is that they were seekers.



They were willing to risk the danger of a journey because they were motivated by discovering truth.

And that pursuit of truth led them beyond boundaries; the places that were familiar; their own traditions; and even into the sacred writings of a community of faith that was not their own.

A few moments ago, we heard Anna read from the prophet Isaiah – foretelling visitors from the east who would come – drawn to the light that would come into the world.

We also know that when they finally arrived at the place the star led them, what they discovered – what was revealed to them – what was made manifest – was the truth seen in the flesh and blood of a child.

Not the truth of intellectual assent.

Not the truth of careful, reasoned thought.

But the truth of what it looked like for heaven and earth to collide in a child who embodied God’s love and presence in a way that nothing else ever has or can.

At the end of their journey, the magi discovered that the truth they had been seeking was a **who** – not a what.

And when they saw Jesus – they were overwhelmed with joy.

And they worshipped him.



That kind of moment – that recognition of what is ultimately true – is what we as the church are asked to receive...and share with subsequent generations.

Our forebears in the Presbyterian Church called it The Preservation of the Truth.

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I don't know about you, but for me, at first glance, the phrase "The Preservation of the Truth," sounds a little clinical. Like those who originally articulated these Great Ends of the Church expected us to bottle truth up, freeze it in time, protect it against harm, and treat it like a museum piece that we put on display for our children and our children's children to visit on occasion.

Moving beyond my hang-ups on the language, however, I think the wisdom of this Great End is to acknowledge that, as the church – one of our most important responsibilities is to share the truth about who Jesus is with a world that is desperate for the good news that Jesus brings.

We have been **entrusted** with this truth – attested to in Scripture, and made manifest by how **we** – as Christ's body – carry out our life...together as a family of faith...and in relationship to the world that Jesus came to save.



If that sounds like a big, bold responsibility...not to be taken lightly – you’re right.

That is why it is important that we – as the church – understand this as part of our charge.

Over the years, the church – and our church – has taken this responsibility seriously. There is a certain **gravity** in knowing that God has entrusted a very human institution with a truth that sometimes competes with other messages in the world around us.

It is understandable that the weight of this responsibility – of preserving the truth - is a source of principle and passion for people of faith. Rightly so. We should not be casual about the trust that God has placed in us.

And yet – sometimes...quite often, frankly – in the church’s effort to preserve truth, we make the mistake of assuming that “truth” is about getting our facts straight; that “truth” is about getting our beliefs right; that “truth” is about ordering our understanding of someone too wonderful and mysterious to fully comprehend.

And when we do that – when we attempt to define what is true by what we **think**, and whether it fits within our carefully constructed categories – then we



lose sight of what Jesus meant when, as an adult, he described himself as the way, the truth, and the life.

When we disembodied the truth...when we try to define, and understand, and control the truth of who Jesus was...within the constraints of our limited language and understanding...we tread on dangerous and divisive ground.

There is a reason why, today, the church of Jesus Christ is fragmented into 45,000 different denominations. It's not because one of us is right and the other 44,999 are wrong. It is because when we confuse the truth of who Jesus is – for what we need him to be – than our aim is really more about the preservation of ourselves/and our brand/and our point of view – than it is about building up Christ's body.

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In our robust, complicated, dynamic, fluid, and – some would say – post-modern world, truth can seem elusive.

You don't have to do anything other than flip the channel, or take stock of a few different polls, or read two different editorials to know that – in our age, truth is contested...where you have some people believing that up is down, and others who believe down is up.





Honestly, there have been times when I wondered how it was ever going to be possible for the church to be about “The Preservation of the Truth” in the midst of a world that is increasingly growing more fragmented around what the truth actually is.

And yet, I also know that there are people who still seek it: a solid ground to anchor their lives into something beyond themselves; something eternal that can offer a hope beyond the things we can buy; a vision for what this world can – and should – be when it is all said and done.

And, I think, the only place you can find that is in the life, death, and resurrection of the one who came – not to be served, but to serve.

In doing some reading this week, a friend of mine reminded me of a story about a preacher named Fred Craddock and a scholar named Albert Schweitzer.

Albert Schweitzer, of course, was a master organist, a medical doctor, a philosopher, a biblical scholar, and a writer. Before he went to medical school, Schweitzer famously wrote a book called *The Quest for the Historical Jesus* that was the cause for acclaim and criticism in church circles.

Fred Craddock, himself a biblical scholar and a preacher, had read Schweitzer’s book and dismissed it as “more water than wine.” Craddock heard that



Schweitzer was to give an organ concert at a church in a nearby city and would be available in the Fellowship Hall afterwards to engage in conversation.

On the way to the concert, Craddock filled a notebook with questions he had for Dr. Schweitzer – issues he took with Schweitzer’s scholarship and claims. After the concert, Craddock rushed to the Fellowship Hall to get a seat on the front row – and waited with his lap-full of questions.

Craddock writes, “After a while he came in, shaggy hair, big white mustache, stooped, and seventy-five years old...He came in with a cup of tea...stood in front of the group...and thanked everybody: ‘You’ve been very warm, hospitable to me. I thank you for it, and I wish I could stay longer among you, but I must go back to Africa. I must go back to Africa because my people are poor and diseased and hungry and dying, and I have to go. If there is anyone here in this room who has the love of Jesus...would you go with me?’

Craddock said, “I looked down at my questions; they were so absolutely stupid. And I learned, again, what it means to be Christian and had hopes that I could be that someday.”

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For 200 years, the members and pastors and staff of our – particular part of Christ’s body on Trade Street – have sought to be faithful in what it means to be the church.



Now – perhaps, more than ever – the best way can “Preserve the Truth” is to embody it: to reach out to our city in the broken places, to cultivate a community of care that blurs the lines of difference, to explore the gift of faith with honest questions that bring stronger understanding, to worship in ways that lift us up where we can glimpse God’s glory.

And when we do that – those who are yearning, and seeking truth will find it. Not because of what we think, or what we say...but because of who we are – and whom we represent.

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In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

