

Preparing, Not Planting

By
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From the Pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

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Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi from the east came to Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star in the east 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 magi 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 in the east, 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.

A new year always marks the start of a journey. Whether you awoke on Thursday morning happy to have put 2025 in the rearview mirror or feeling a bit nostalgic over what happened during the previous twelve months, we have collectively turned a page in our lives.

For the Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church, that annual dynamic has a new component this time as during each of the last thirteen Januarys you moved into a new year under the faithful leadership of Agnes Norfleet as your Senior Pastor. There is much to celebrate about her ministry; a tenure that will continue to bless this body of faith for years to come. Yet Agnes retired in October, and your Session has hired a different Southerner to serve as Interim Senior Pastor. Among other things, that change means this Sunday launches a new year of transition.

I pondered that dynamic in choosing the two Biblical passages for this morning. The first one is suggested by the lectionary and likely is being heard in faith communities around the world today. My hunch, though, is that we are among the few churches pondering our second reading. I'm convinced both narratives have something to say to this moment at BMPC.

Before turning to those texts, though, I want to share an image that a Presbyterian pastor named Tom passed on to me. He has been a minister 14 years longer than I and has served as an Interim Pastor twice. I have not. So, when I began the conversation with your search committee, I took Tom to lunch, hoping to learn from his experience. That certainly turned out to be true, and part of what he shared was this comment. "An interim pastor's job is to prepare the landscape for the next pastor, but not to plant any trees." I love that image as it helps frame the months ahead and my role. Namely, that I am here to help you get ready for the future, to prepare

the soil for your next installed pastor, but not to initiate any new church-wide priorities that are more tree-like or enduring. With that image in mind, we turn to our two Biblical narratives.

The Matthew passage recalls visitors from the east who follow a star. Upon arriving in Jerusalem, they go to King Herod and ask, “Where is the child who has born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising and have come to pay him homage.” Herod calls in the Jewish scribes, who report that ancient prophecies name Bethlehem as the place to look. The wise men return to Herod, who asks a few questions and then sends them on their way, requesting that they report back on their findings. So “that I may also go and pay him homage,” he lies. The star leads the men to a home in Bethlehem where they find the Christ child. They present their gifts, yet warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, the men return home by a different route.

Our account from Numbers tells of a moment centuries earlier when the Israelites stand at the border to Canaan. God promised their ancestor Abraham that this land would eventually belong to his descendants, so Moses sends in several men to “spy out the land of Canaan.” They are to report on several things—the quality of the land and whether the people seem strong or weak. They are to evaluate if the soil is good or not, and if the towns are fortified or unwalled. “Be bold,” Moses concludes, “and bring some of the fruit of the land.” Forty days later, the spies return, and this summer in worship, we will explore what unfolded afterwards. Today, we stop with their sending and consider insights from their journey and that of the magi.

In the case of the wise men, they had two tools that I plan to use as your interim senior pastor. I haven’t noticed any unusual celestial bodies recently, but I do have the mission statement this church adopted in conjunction with its 150th anniversary celebration. Its key bullet points are three-fold: “Loving God in the Gathered Community, Welcoming God in

Friend and Stranger, and Partnering with God and Neighbor in Service.” Sometimes, those priorities are summarized as a call to “welcome generously, love deeply, and act boldly.” I love its aspirational vision, and to my way of thinking, that document is the star you have established to guide us. So, part of my work with you will be drawing from its priorities while actively using another tool utilized by those visitors from the east, namely, the asking of questions.

Their chief one was “Where is he who has born king of the Jews?” We could reasonably conclude that such a question to King Herod was naïve, as that ruler had a well-earned reputation for reacting poorly to any perceived threats to his reign. In Andy’s fine sermon last Sunday, we pondered the horrific outcome to that question. Some of you might come to feel that a few of my questions are naïve, too, but they will be part of my toolbox nonetheless.

When it comes to the mission statement, I found some resources in the office that describe the thorough process that resulted in the document’s creation. Thus, my questions about that statement are whether it still reflects who you are as a body of faith two years after its approval, or if there are updates or tweaks to be made. I need to learn such things, both for my time of service here, but also because such discoveries will go a long way toward determining if that document can serve as the mission study the Presbytery of Philadelphia will require before a pastoral search can begin. I don’t have that answer yet and will strive to find out.

On that question and others, I suspect my approach will be like that of those spies sent by Moses. Normally, I would resist the term “spy,” because it suggests someone who is undercover, and my role is quite visible. I suspect, for instance, that few CIA operatives have their real name listed on some church bulletin or website. Furthermore, the term “spy” implies for me a kind of work that at times can be underhanded or compromising in some way.

Thus, it was helpful when Thomas Dozeman, an OT Professor and Presbyterian minister, broadened my understanding of the term. In writing of the Hebrew verb translated in our text as “to spy” he says “The primary meaning is not the act of spying for conquest. It is used in wisdom literature to describe how one searches for wisdom and how the righteous give advice to friends.” (Dozeman, Thomas, *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, “The Book of Numbers,” Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998, p. 121)

I appreciate his concept of a spy who searches for insight together with others, as that will be my approach here. I plan to bring new eyes to all aspects of life at BMPC with a spirit of curiosity and then to ask such questions as “Can you help me understand how this tradition or practice began?” Every now and then, I may ask, “You say that such thus-and-so is a priority, but I’ve noticed something that seems to contradict it. Am I viewing things correctly?” I’ve already begun that process. To help you imagine how that work could unfold, let me give you an example of something I noticed in a worship service 23 years ago.

After several conversations with the Pastor Nominating Committee of the Doylestown Presbyterian Church, I adjusted my itinerary so that I could travel to Bucks County in early 2003 for one more visit. By that point, the PNC had interviewed me by phone and in person, they had traveled more than once to the congregation I was serving in North Carolina to hear me preach, and checked references. We were nearing the point where a deciding whether to extend the call.

Unrelated to that conversation, I had made plans to attend a continuing education workshop at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. I told the moderator of the Doylestown PNC about that trip and offered to make another in-person visit with the committee. I did so before fully appreciating how wide the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania is. We decided that I would meet with the PNC on a Sunday afternoon. I arrived in Bucks

County on Saturday evening and looked forward to worshipping anonymously with the Doylestown church the next day.

I learned later that my cover as a church spy was blown in two ways. An Associate Pastor assisting in worship that morning had been a seminary classmate. Even though I was seated near the back of the sanctuary, she spotted me from the lectern and, after the service, located my photo in the directory of our seminary years. I heard later, too, that a couple who shared a pew with me that morning said to each other afterwards: “I think that visitor may be our next pastor because we noticed he didn’t have to look at the bulletin very often and he sang loudly.”

I relished the chance to bring new eyes to that service two decades ago. Of course, there were many aspects to it that were familiar and meaningful, yet two moments that struck me as odd. The pews in that sanctuary consist of two long benches joined in the middle, unlike the pews here that appear to be from one piece of wood. On that morning, I was sitting on the right-hand side of the slightly elevated spot. When I tried to pass the friendship pad to someone on my left, the member smiled pleasantly but then shook her head and indicated I was to pass the pad back to its starting point. The same thing happened when it came time to pass the offering plate.

Upon becoming their pastor, I shared that experience with the Worship Committee moderator, who was surprised to hear that it was unusual. I went on to offer that I had worshiped in many churches and had never experienced that kind of tradition, and noted that it could be confusing for visitors. Thus, the committee agreed to an “experiment” of passing the friendship pad and offering plate all the way across. That is the church’s pattern to this day. Months later, I saw the same thing happen at a Presbytery meeting and concluded it must be a Philly thing! You pass those two items in the familiar way, but I will be bringing new eyes here even so.

It will be a partnership as we prepare the landscape while avoiding the planting of any symbolic trees. You will play a critical role in that outcome in at least two ways.

As I suspect there will be times when someone here will come to me with an idea for something she or he feels needs to be changed. I promise to listen intently and consider the idea, and sometimes, an adjustment in our shared life will be the outcome. Yet, I'm guessing there will also be times when I will respond, "That kind of change needs to wait for your new pastor."

You can also help me stay true to that image. I was an installed pastor for 36 years. Counting my time with you, I have been an Interim Pastor for 21 days, and thus, my instincts may push against my interim training. So, if any of you hear me name some project that seems more in the purview of an installed pastor, feel free to say, "John, that sounds like a tree to me."

Lastly, I want to note that there are details from today's readings that do not apply to our work together. At the end of the Israelite spies' mission, the people largely reject their assessment and declare they are not up to the kind of work God has put before them. As a result, the Israelites end up wandering in the wilderness for 30 years. Our timeline will be much shorter!

Likewise, after completing their journey to the Christ child, the magi return home by a different route. When my time with you draws to a close, I don't plan to exit in that fashion in either a metaphorical or literal sense, but instead hope that on my last drive up the Blue Route to Doylestown, the landscape at BMPC will be fully prepared. That no new trees will have been planted, but instead all is ready for your next called and installed Senior Pastor.

Yet in addition to my service here as magi and spy, I look forward to working alongside your amazing staff and faithful church officers, to break bread with and learn from you, to experience first-hand the diverse ministries of this congregation, to share in your times of joy and heartbreak, and to have fun. It's going to be a full and rich journey. Let's get started!