

“Mischief and Myrrh”
Matthew 2:1-12
Second Sunday after Christmas Day

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Westminster, Greenville
Ben Dorr

Let me invite you, as we begin this morning, to consider your relationship with DARKNESS.

I realize, as soon as I say that, you may have never thought of having a relationship with darkness.

But I think you do.
We all do.

- Are you afraid of the dark?
- Do you stay inside when the sun goes down, not comfortable driving, because it's getting dark?
- Maybe some of you enjoy camping, and your favorite time camping is when it's dark, with no streetlights nearby, and you can see all the stars in the sky?

Have you ever given any thought to what darkness does to you?

Darkness is a pretty powerful thing.
One thing it can do is narrow our vision.
Stoke our fears.

For example, I remember the time back when we lived in Dallas, that we were having some trouble with rats in our yard. So we got some rat traps with poisoned food in them, hoping to get rid of the rats.

One night I was letting our dog out in the backyard, and the dog FROZE, and started barking...and I saw these two eyes staring back at me in the night from one of our crate myrtle trees. Then those eyes MOVED...and this greyish creature with a long tail ran from the tree and along the fence to another tree...

I ran inside the house to my wife and I said, “Come outside, you’ve got to see the size of this RAT! Should I get a shovel? Where’s the shovel?”

I go off looking for the shovel, and my wife and the dog go out into the backyard...and we meet next to the garage, and she says, “Honey, you know that shovel you’re holding like a light saber? Please don’t use it. That’s a POSSUM in our backyard, not a rat...”

Have you ever thought about what darkness does to you?
Darkness is a pretty powerful thing.
And yet, it does not have to be a DISABLING thing...

I read a few years ago about how the great cellist Yo-Yo Ma used to play (maybe he still does) a Bach suite from memory before going to bed every night.

“This isn’t practicing, it’s contemplating,” he said. “You’re alone with your soul.”

Now where did Yo-Yo Ma get the habit of doing this every night?
From his father.

“The father of cellist Yo-Yo Ma spent World War II in Paris,
where he lived alone in a garret throughout the German occupation.

In order to restore sanity to his world, he [Yo-Yo Ma’s father]
would practice violin pieces by Bach during the day
and at night, during blackout hours,
[he would] play them alone, in the dark.”¹

The sound of those strings was a way of creating beauty,
a way of maintaining hope during a dark time...

Now why do I want you to think about DARKNESS this morning?

Because here we are, first Sunday of the new year,

¹ Philip Yancey, *Reaching for the Invisible God: What Can We Expect to Find?*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000.

and we just heard a story about light...
 a familiar story of a beautiful and dazzling star—
 that leads wise men from the East to Jesus.

We call this the story of Epiphany—a story of illumination,
 a story of how Jesus came to be a light even to the Gentiles,
 even to folks like you and me.

It IS a story of light, to be sure, but let's not forget:
 that light is surrounded by darkness.

“In the time of King Herod...”
 THAT'S how our story begins.

And whether Herod is trying to trick the wise men as he does in today's text,
 or whether he wants to hunt down Jesus, as we learn in verse 13,
 or whether he's slaughtering all babies under the age of 3,
 as we read in verse 16—

there's enough darkness in the second chapter of Matthew
 to rival anything we might hear about in our world today.

When Matthew wrote this chapter in his Gospel, he was recalling the Isaiah
 passage we heard a few minutes ago:

“...darkness shall cover the earth,
 and thick darkness the peoples;
 but the Lord will arise upon you,
 and his glory will appear over you.

Nations shall come to your light,
 and kings to the brightness of your dawn.”

Epiphany is a story of light appearing in the midst of darkness.

Of course, darkness can take many forms.

There's the darkness of the Herods of this world, those who are OPPOSED
 to the love and grace of God.

And there's the darkness we find within ourselves.
Darkness that exists within people who want to SHARE the love of God.

Do you remember when those letters that Mother Teresa wrote were revealed to the public years ago? Do you recall what she said about her own spiritual state?

“Please pray for me, that it may please God to lift this darkness from my soul...”²

Sometimes, darkness isn't a beautiful thing.
Or a fearful thing.
Sometimes, it can be an OVERWHELMING thing.

If you have ever fought the demons of depression or addiction, you know.
If you have ever walked through corridors of grief, you know.
If you have ever been helpless to help your own child, you know.

You know that one of the most frustrating things about darkness is that many times, there's no apparent reason for it. It's not part of some divine plan...many times, the darkness just IS.

Think about the first chapter of Genesis.

“In the beginning...the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep...”

Where did the darkness come from?
We don't know....we don't know.

In August of 1949, fifteen U.S. airborne firefighters—the Smokejumpers—
jumped into the sky in the Montana wilderness
to fight the Mann Gulch fire.

² *Mother Teresa, Come Be My Light: The Private Writings of the “Saint of Calcutta”*, edited by Brian Kolodiejchuk, New York: Doubleday, 2007.

Within an hour, all but three of them were dead or mortally burned.

Norman Maclean reconstructed the events of that day in his book *Young Men and Fire*. Maclean tried to understand what happened, why it happened, and how to make sure such a tragedy never happened again.

What Maclean found through all his searching, however...was incomplete. There remained unsolved riddles and half-understood actions.³

NOT SO, he observed, about the MOVIE that was made
three years after the fire.

In the movie, lessons are clear,
and the foreman saves his boys in the next fire,
so that everyone lives HAPPILY EVER AFTER...

Commenting on the film, Maclean writes:

“Here is this movie...that has attained some kind of immortality by easily adding to small broken pieces of truth...Our story about the Mann Gulch fire [is] hard on itself by trying to find its true ending.

“Perhaps,” Maclean continues, “this is a reminder to keep open the possibility that there is no real ending...to the story of the Mann Gulch fire.

“If so, then let it be so—there’s a lot of tragedy in the universe
that has MISSING PARTS and comes to NO conclusion...”⁴

I think Matthew would agree with Norman Maclean—
there is a plenty of tragedy in the universe without answers,
plenty of darkness without explanation,

³ Norman Maclean, *Young Men and Fire*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992.

⁴ *The Norman Maclean Reader*, edited by O. Alan Weltzien, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008.

and it does no good to dress up our lives like the movie version of events.

That's one reason why Matthew gives us the story of Herod and the wise men:

to say that the darkness is real,
to say that God's love and light always face opposition,
that the forces of chaos and sin are VIGILANT
about dismantling the love and extinguishing the light.

But in the end, I think Matthew takes us in a different direction than Norman Maclean:

Matthew tells us there IS a conclusion,
a point, a message...
and that message can be found in the gifts of the wise men.

Look at the gifts that the wise men brought.
Gold, frankincense, and myrrh.
Those gifts are an echo of Isaiah 60, our OT passage for this morning.
Or I should say, almost an echo.

Do you remember what gifts are mentioned in the Isaiah passage?

"Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn... They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord."

Gold and frankincense.
What gift did Matthew add?
Myrrh.
In Isaiah, there is no myrrh.

But the wise men in Matthew also brought myrrh.
Why would the wise men bring myrrh?
Well, what was myrrh used for? Anybody know?

One of its uses was embalming.

It was used on the occasion of a funeral.

Look, this supposed to catch our attention.

How many of you have ever been to a baby shower before? How many of you have ever brought a gift to a baby shower? When you went to buy your gift, how many of you thought that the perfect gift for the family would be embalming ointment?

Of course not!

But that's what the wise men did.

The wise men showed up after Jesus' birth *prepared for Jesus' funeral!*

Now why would they do that?

Let me get at it this way.

Let's go back to Norman Maclean for a second.

Maclean wrote his book *Young Men and Fire* in part to help prevent such a tragedy from happening again.

And when Maclean died in 1990, it looked like he had succeeded.

But the terrible IRONY of the story is that four years after Maclean's death, another tragedy like the first one occurred in Colorado...and Maclean's son, John, chronicled those terrible events in a book of his own.⁵

Taken together, those two books are a testimony to the truth that Matthew wants us to see.

No matter how hard we work,
no matter how noble our intentions are,
we cannot save ourselves.

No matter how many people we love,

⁵ John N. Maclean, *Fire on the Mountain: The True Story of the South Canyon Fire*, New York: HarperCollins, 1999.

no matter how much good we ever do,
we cannot save ourselves.

When the wise men bring myrrh at the beginning of Jesus' story, they are pointing us to the END of the story.

To the reality that not even Jesus, not even God's chosen Messiah, had the power to save himself. At the end of his life, when he was hanging on the cross, do you remember what those who saw him said?

"You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself!"

"He saved others; he cannot save himself."

And they were right!

Jesus could not save himself.

Jesus placed his life ENTIRELY in the hands of God, because only God could save Jesus, and only God can save you and me.

Of course, it wasn't just at the END of Jesus' life that God intervened... God was continually saving Jesus' life, even when he was very young.

How did the wise men know not to return to Herod?

God came to them in a dream.

How did Joseph know to get out of town and flee to Egypt?

God came to him in a dream.

God was continually coming to save Jesus, just like God comes again and again to save you and me.

The other side of we cannot save ourselves is this:

God still saves us.

Not long ago and far away, but here and now, today.

What does that mean?

When old wounds with a loved one are mended, you know.
 When hope is found in the midst of despair, you know.
 When prayers ARE answered,
 when you are surprised by a moment of unspeakable grace, you know.

You know the truth that you could not give those gifts to yourself.
 They came from the One who created you, and promises to never leave you.
 I don't think the story of the wise men is as much of a nativity story as it is a
 RESURRECTION story. A NEW life story.

A story of a God who promises to show up in our lives, again and again, to
 save us...

The Presbyterian pastor Scott Black Johnston tells about when his father
 died a number of years ago.

Scott was serving a church in Atlanta at the time.
 He went back to the small town of Mora, Minnesota for the funeral.

He describes being in the funeral home,
 with his dad laying there in the coffin,
 and he's "trying to make small talk" with all these old family friends.

"My mind was reeling with the kind of crazy mixture of emotions that being
 in the presence of a dead loved one seems to bring on," he writes.

"I wasn't sure whether I could stand being in that space much longer; and
 yet, I knew that this is where I had to be."

At that moment, he says, two people walked into the funeral home.

He recognized them...but they weren't from Minnesota.
 They were members of his church in Atlanta.
 It was COMPLETELY unexpected.

"God doesn't fax salvation in from some suite in heaven's ritzy district,"
 Scott writes. "God comes. God incarnates. God steps out of grandeur to stand
 with us in awkward places at awful times to experience life and death."

Of his two friends who showed up from Atlanta, he writes:

“It is impossible to describe the power of that moment.”

One part of his mind said: These folks don’t belong here.

But then...he looked at them, and he knew—they belonged right there.

They were carriers of God’s light, messengers of God’s love.⁶

Let me invite you to consider your relationship with the darkness this morning.

Is it something you try to avoid?

If you’re like me, the answer is often yes.

And yet, Matthew reminds us today that as followers of Jesus, the darkness is often where you and I belong.

So we too can share God’s light.

Se we too can be carriers of God’s love.

Don’t go through this year trying to fix people or trying to save people.

Just find some darkness, be a light...and let God do the saving.

Amen.

⁶ From Scott Black Johnston’s sermon “Save Us,” April 5, 2009, on [www. Day1.org](http://www.Day1.org).