

Jesus, Atlas, the Magi and Herod: A Sermon for Epiphany in a Time of Rising Fascism

Rev. Rob Shearer + Matthew 2: 1-128+ January 4, 2026 + The AbbeyChurch + Feast of the Epiphany

Pray with me, if you will, in the words of Christina Rossetti:

What can I give Him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;
If I were a Wise One, I would do my part;
Yet what I can I give Him: give my heart. Amen. [please be seated / pause]

Earlier this week, I received an email from one of you which signed off with the simplest of phrases. It said this: “We could all use a little peace.” [pause]

Just over a week ago, we proclaimed the scandalous old Story; the coming of the so-called prince of peace, the very incarnation of God-who-has-become-flesh, God who took on mortal, perishable skin and every bit of the messiness of what it means to be human. God who become one-with-us, who became one *of* us, God-in-solidarity with God’s beloved creation.

And this preacher, for one, stands by that story.

The prince of peace has come. Amen, right?

And all is calm, all is bright. And the world is at peace, right? [pause] Well, hell, no. As we enter a new year, sure, we can hope it’ll somehow be different this time ‘round the sun. I don’t know about you, but it feels to me that, all too often, things are just getting worse.

Our story shifts from our Christmas eve wonder to today; the pilgrimage of the Magi – probably Zoroastrian priests – and then the so-called massacre of the innocents, as we heard in today’s extended reading. Any lingering intimations of some domesticated nativity scene Christmas card with gentle Jesus meek and mild – *no crying he makes* – are put to rest with the reality of a world of violence where despots cling even harder to their tenuous power and even send death squads to kill babies. Where, as our text suggests, Rachel weeps uncontrollably as the empire strikes back. This is a story of the power of the people in the face of such puppet leaders. It’s a story of resilience where foreign priest-astrologers conspire to trick the murderous emperor, where the young peasant family flees to North Africa to take refuge from the actions of the jealous overlords.

More than ever, the old Story goes, those in power are threatened by the beauty that is breaking open.

2000 years later – bombs fall in Gaza, Venezuela, Nigeria, Yemen, Sudan, Myanmar, Ukraine, to name a few. Refugees still flee.

God indeed, I believe, came as a vulnerable baby to a young peasant girl in a nowhere place to redeem this aching creation and bring peace once and for all. This, friends, *is* our story. But, then and now, the ones with the big guns simply aren’t impressed. In their hearts here is still war to be had, power to be pumped up, resources to extract, people to exploit, and territory to defend or annex. [pause]

Matt was telling me of this evocative image that he recently came across. [slide] In Rockefeller Square, on 5th avenue in midtown Manhattan, and flanked on three sides by some of the world’s largest and most influential investment banks, law firms, and media companies is a giant, four-story bronze statue of the Greek Titan Atlas with his perfectly

The story of Atlas, for those who don't know it, is one of divine punishment, where Atlas is cursed by the god Zeus to carry the weight of the cosmos on his shoulders for losing a battle. It's been used as a symbol of the strength of humanity, of endurance, and even of the good of capitalism and industry.

On the 4th side there in Rockefeller square – the one that isn't skyscrapers, stands a building that predates the Atlas statue by about 60 years, St. Patrick's cathedral. It was built by the sweat and toil of Catholic immigrants in the 19th century.

It's a place where those who are ground down by the realities of the filthy rotten systems of this earth might come to find a glimpse of wonder and beauty and seek truth in a bigger story.

And when its doors are open, Atlas stares right down the middle aisle of the Cathedral toward the altar right at the priest presiding at communion.

But what's really cool to me is that there, tucked directly behind the Cathedral's high altar, is hidden away a small, almost unassuming statue of the Christ Child standing with an orb in his hand. Yes, there, behind that altar, is this fragile, small counterpoint to Atlas and all the towers of commerce and trade and all the ways of power and might.

And this, friends, this smallness, is what the Magi and shepherds came to pay homage to. No, not to enter a story of a God of divine retribution, not to be part of a story of power over, not a story of a warrior God – but the sheer counterpoint to all of that. This is a God who loved the world and came not to condemn or show power-over, but to more into the 'hood, to liberate and to be present with us.

This God, Jesus, the tiny vulnerable one, is the God of all the displaced, the outsiders, those with the wrong religion or creed, as were the Magi. This is the God of the aching, the hungry, and the sinner. Thomas Merton points out that Jesus' "place is with those who do not belong, who are rejected by power because they are regarded as weak, those who are discredited, who are denied the status of persons, tortured, exterminated." He goes on to remind us that Jesus is there with "...those for whom there is no room, [that] Christ is present in this world. He is mysteriously present in those for whom there seems to be nothing but the world at its worst."

It is these, the true, poor huddled masses, the ones who broken hearts, who have come to pay homage to a bigger Story.

That Story is of God that we proclaim today who a complete and absolute contrast to the insecure, power-clenching image of the fascist puppet king Herod, the king of the Jews.

The God who we pay homage to is not some distant God of power and might. This God invites us into the grace of giving to another kind of king – to give at personal cost – not as some virtue signal - but as a public witness and way of surrender which is both personal and, yes, friends, so political.

The God to whom we bring our gifts is not the God of Herod or of white Christian nationalists, but of outsiders who are drawn into this wonder; shepherds and working folk, and Magi – notably those from another culture and religion, who, our story shows, 'get it' more than the insiders do. God has come for those who have nothing to lose.

And this God, today, invites us, too, into a bigger Story of wonder. In the grey towering face of empires and wars, this is a story of a cosmos of rich colours and scents – of a silent night in the face of the violence around - of a regathering of the disbursed.

And Matthew invokes not one, but three different prophets to make his point. Something huge is happening here, folks. This is the new Moses, the One who will set His people free - the Messiah. Indeed, the One who will set us all free, as the witness of the Magi, my fellow gentiles, attest too. They use ancient texts and even astrology to enter this world of wonders, presumably transformed by whatever they encountered that night.

And, no, it's not clean or easy or safe or domesticated. We've extended our reading of this story today beyond where it's usually stops; that is, the wise men returning home. We read on to hear of unintended consequence of challenging those who are insecure and clutching for power – these foreign visitors making a fool of Herod.

And so it is that we also hear that this new Moses and his wee holy family will have to cross back to cosmopolitan Egypt – which was kind of the mid-Manhattan of the ancient world - for sanctuary and safety before he can settle in his own nowhere hometown [pause].

2000 years later, we have a choice. I'd suggest today that our call, as those who follow Jesus, is to choose Jesus over Atlas or Herod, to pay homage to God who comes in vulnerability and who, at the end of the story, dies the same. Not a God of chiseled, adult perfection of muscles and strength, but one whose life will end as it began – that is, in voluntary surrender; in *sorrowing, sighing, bleeding and dying* - with smell of that embalming spice myrrh; a ring circling in both his childhood and his death when the mocking sign 'King of the Jews' hung above his cross.

This, this is the self-surrendering, sacrificed, vulnerable, crucified God who has come to struggle like us, to be with us, and who seeks to regather all the displaced, to bring us all back into God's heart, to make us all aware of God's mercy and grace.

This the is God of those who are displaced; those who hold a different power, a power from below, from the underside; it's a power of nonviolence, of creativity that silences the violent. Ultimately, this is the Incarnate power of love and peace in the very face of death itself. This is our soul power.

This is a story that reminds us that in the giving of our gifts, great or small, we open our hands in surrender and in doing so, we catch a glimpse of sheer grace in the cry of a tiny babe.

In the giving, in coming to Jesus, in who Jesus is - we find a different way, a way of surrender, a way of love, which calls us, like the Magi, to leave here and return home by another way - a way of peace.

And yes, this is a God who has come to make us aware that, yes, we do all deserve a little peace. That we all need grace and peace to make it through the night.

Yes, in these troubled times, in all our struggles, personally and globally, siblings, we could all use a little peace.

And so we proclaim with unfettered hope in the face of all violence that the prince of peace has come, and we too, come to adore and pay homage to him.

O come, let us adore him, and let's pilgrimage together in His Way of grace and of peace.

Amen.