

**Sunday, January 6 and Wednesday, January 9**  
**Epiphany of Our Lord + Matthew 2:1-12**  
Rev. Nancy M. Raabe + Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Marshall, WI



The familiar tale of the magi: What parallels can we find and our own day, and how can they help us to move more deeply into the amazing grace of this story?

Let's plunge head-first into the middle of the Civil Rights movement. Early in 1963, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, whose first president was Martin Luther King, had decided to focus on one of the county's most segregated cities, Birmingham, Alabama. The goal was to desegregate downtown businesses, using methods of nonviolent protest including sit-ins, kneel-ins at local churches, and a march to the county building to mark the beginning of a voter registration drive.

The SCLC leaders knew it would be rough going because of Birmingham's fearsome Commissioner of Public Safety and police chief, Bull Connor. Indeed, the first thing Connor did in response to the protests was to force through ban on all public displays of resistance. The protest leaders knew this was unconstitutional but geared up anyway for mass arrests.

King was one of the first to be arrested, and a few days later wrote his monumental Letter from Birmingham Jail. But pretty soon the protests ran out of

people who were willing to risk being arrested. So one of the leaders, James Bevel, came up with a bold idea: Train high school students to be part of the demonstrations. On May 2nd more than a thousand students gathered at the 16th Street Baptist Church. They marched out 50 at a time with the goal of walking to City Hall to speak to officials about segregation. None of the children made it. The first day they were arrested and jailed without further incident. But the second day as more children began to march, Bull Connor unleashed his police dogs and fire hoses. National television networks broadcast the scenes of the dogs attacking demonstrators and water from the fire hoses knocking down the schoolchildren.

This march became known as the “Children’s Crusade,” and what is rarely recognized is that it changed the course of the Civil Rights movement. Until then the Kennedy administration had been lukewarm on the Civil Rights movement because JFK and his brother Robert considered the protesters to be a political liability. But national outrage over Bull Connor’s attacks on children finally got the White House involved. [8-signs] With federal intervention, a week later Birmingham agreed to desegregate downtown lunch counters and other public accommodations; to create a committee to eliminate discriminatory hiring practices; to arrange for the release of jailed protesters; and to establish regular means of communication between black and white leaders. And all because of the children.

These kids were not forced into action. They were no one's pawns. They went willingly and believed in what they were doing. "I didn't hate white people," one girl said later. "I didn't even know any. I just knew the system was wrong."

As models of resistance, these children were much like the Magi in today's Gospel. They knew the truth and acted accordingly. We're not sure at what point the magi figured out what Herod was really trying to do—kill Jesus, not worship him—but my theory is that it had something to do with the star, since after all the magi were astronomers. This bright star had led them all that way to Jerusalem and then must have stopped over Jerusalem. When Herod ordered the magi to find out where Jesus was, and they set out for Bethlehem, the star began to move again. Matthew reports, "There, ahead of them, was the star that they had seen at its rising." They followed it until it stopped again, and before them were the young child and his devoted parents. Great joy fell upon the magi and they bowed low to worship the new king.

We can also draw a parallel between Bull Connor and King Herod.

Herod was not a king in the traditional sense of an all-powerful ruler, but merely a client of the Roman Empire. He had been appointed client king of Judea by the Roman Senate. He oversaw the state of Judea but was expected to serve the interests of Rome, not his own. But Herod exaggerated and abused his power. So when he heard the magi's report that a child had been born who was "king of the Jews," his deepest

insecurities shot to the surface. Matthew tells us, “Herod was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him.” He reacted with deviousness, hatred, and violence.

In Birmingham, Bull Connor abused his power as well far beyond what was proscribed by his office. The city was governed at that time by a commission instead of a mayor. Connor was one of these commissioners, but he unilaterally made himself the most powerful member and people were afraid to go against him. When the protests began in Birmingham, his deepest insecurities shot to the surface. He reacted with deviousness, hatred and violence.

The children stood up to Bull Connor, and the magi stood up to King Herod. Both groups were resisters. They knew the truth. And history has recorded it: Herod is remembered mainly the massacre of the infants. Bull Connor has become an international symbol of institutional racism.

How did these the magi, these astronomer priests, know Jesus was the Messiah? Clearly they knew nothing of the Hebrew scriptures. Yet they recognized Jesus as the Savior of the world and knew they could not trust Herod. So they avoided Jerusalem altogether on their long trip home and never told him where Jesus was.

We don't get the rest of the story in today's Gospel, but what happened next reveals the depth of Herod's fear and cowardice. Furious at the magi's resistance, Herod ordered all children age 2 and younger around Bethlehem to be slaughtered. But Jesus

was safe; an angel had already told Joseph to leave immediately for Egypt, and the family returned a few months later after Herod died.

Isn't it amazing that we have a Savior whose very powerlessness—as a baby, on the cross—shines a light on those who abuse their power? Isn't it amazing that when God's truth becomes known, those who have abused their power are knocked off their thrones? Isn't it amazing that we have a Redeemer who could not save himself from being put to death by the demand of his own people, but by whose death the world was rescued from sin and death?

The magi are models of resistance for us all of us. When we are confronted by injustice, let us step up. When we see power exercised wrongly, let us speak out. When we find ourselves manipulated by those who live only in fear, let us take another road. For that road leads us home—to the manger, to the cross, and beyond.

Amen.