# **The Third Sunday after Christmas - Baptism of the Lord Sunday**

# **January 10, 2021**

**Matthew 2:1-12 "Words to Ponder"**

Matthew 2:1-12 (CEB)

**2** After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in the territory of Judea during the rule of King Herod, magi came from the east to Jerusalem. 2 They asked, "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We've seen his star in the east, and we've come to honor him."

3 When King Herod heard this, he was troubled, and everyone in Jerusalem was troubled with him. 4 He gathered all the chief priests and the legal experts and asked them where the Christ was to be born. 5 They said, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for this is what the prophet wrote:

6 *You, Bethlehem, land of Judah, by no means are you least among the rulers of Judah, because from you will come one who governs, who will shepherd my people Israel."*

7 Then Herod secretly called for the magi and found out from them the time when the star had first appeared. 8 He sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search carefully for the child. When you've found him, report to me so that I too may go and honor him." 9 When they heard the king, they went; and look, the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stood over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw the star, they were filled with joy. 11 They entered the house and saw the child with Mary his mother. Falling to their knees, they honored him. Then they opened their treasure chests and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. 12 Because they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they went back to their own country by another route.

This morning we are celebrating the season of Epiphany which began on Wednesday, January 6th and continues through February 7. Epiphany is a day when we celebrate the revelation of God's promise and purpose to the nations of the world. I had planned to set aside some time Wednesday to reflect and consider the meaning of Epiphany as I prepared for today. Well that went out the window when the news of the storming of the US capitol building unfolded on the T.V. On a Sunday when I was planning to focus on the transforming power of words, I found myself speechless.

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We witnessed an insurrection that none of us have ever seen before. The last time something like this happened was in 1814 when the British attacked the capitol building. Before Wednesday, the capitol building had never been attacked by U.S. citizens. January 6, 2021 has been named "A Dark Day for Democracy".

There is so much that could be discussed about Wednesday's events, and in the days and weeks ahead, we will continue to learn more about what happened. Today, we know that more than 50 police officers were injured and 5 people, one who was a police officer, died during the breach into the capitol. It was indeed a dark day.

One of the most disturbing things about this riot was that the people who stormed the Capitol building were carrying signs, flags and banners with messages like, "Say Yes to Jesus", "JESUS 2020", "In God We Trust". There was someone carrying an enormous cross. Rioters were heard to call on God to save the republic, others chanted, "Shout if you love Jesus! Shout if you love Trump." The events of Wednesday were a violent mob adorned with Christian symbols. Christian leaders from across the political and ideological spectrum have been speaking out. Jemar Tisby, a Christian author and speaker wrote, "Christians have a responsibility to speak up against this violent movement.” i

Albert Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Seminary in Kentucky and influential voice in the Southern Baptist Convention said, "We are undoubtedly in an agonizing moment, in which evangelical Christians who supported Donald Trump now find ourselves in the position of being tremendously embarrassed by this most recent behavior."

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Rick Warren, the mega church pastor and author wrote, "Armed breaching of capitol security behind a confederate flag is anarchy, un-American, criminal treason and domestic terrorism. President Trump must clearly tell his supporters 'We lost. Go home now." ii

Beth Moore, well known in evangelical circles for her Bible studies, tweeted, "I don't know the Jesus some have paraded and waved around in the middle of this treachery today." "They may be acting in the name of some other Jesus, but that's not the Jesus of the Gospels." iii

I agree, that's not the Jesus of the Gospels. But there are those that, - like the generations before us, have hoped that Jesus would be a military leader who would conquer empires. Recently I read an online post that suggested that Jesus told his disciples to take up arms. The verse they were referencing is Luke 22:36. "Then he said to them, "But now, whoever has a wallet must take it, and likewise a bag. And those who don't own a sword must sell their clothes and buy one." Context is everything, this took place after the last supper as Jesus was preparing to go to the Mount of Olives to pray. Being in Jerusalem at that point was a great risk; he knew a conflict with the Roman Empire was possible. But can we be sure that Jesus intended to fight? The encounter at the Mount of Olives gives us an answer.

Luke 22 says, 49 When those around him recognized what was about to happen, they said, "Lord, should we fight with our swords?" 50 One of them struck the high priest's servant, cutting off his right ear. 51 Jesus responded, "Stop! No more of this!" He touched the slave's ear and healed him. If Jesus had wanted a violent confrontation, this would have been the moment. There is a difference between carrying a sword to protect yourself against aggression, and carrying a sword to be

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the aggressor. Nowhere does Jesus condone aggression against others, even when there is injustice.

To claim that Jesus wants anyone to rise up violently is a false rhetoric. But false rhetoric is what brought us to this place in our nation in the first place. Rhetoric is an art form designed to persuade people to act or believe a particular way. False rhetoric is a weapon that persuades people with deception and lies. Jesus knew all about that. It was claims of blasphemy by religious leaders that enraged Herod. Claims that Jesus was plotting sedition against the Roman Empire got the attention of Pontius Pilate. It was false rhetoric that put Jesus on the cross.

We're living in a very contentious time in our nation, and part of that contention belongs to the Christian church. There words that we speak, the teachings we teach have great importance. I am thankful for the Christian leaders of all denominations who are speaking out. It gives me hope. It is my hope that we will all speak out when we can with a message of non-violence, especially when there is injustice. Saving our nation from corruption through violence and death was not the way of Christ.

Many things were revealed to us on Wednesday, not the least of which is the need to speak out against sinful behavior. I join the voices of Christians who condemn the violent actions of the mob that stormed the Capitol. Wednesday revealed the need for transformation and healing in our nation - and especially in the Christian church. May we, as members of the body of Christ, pray for and practice peaceful ways of speaking truth to power.

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This week we have seen how the power of words can destroy, but words can also bring transformation. Originally, I had planned to talk about the Epiphany stars and the opportunity to experience the Holy Spirit speaking to us through the words we receive. Instead, I am going to share this short story.

In 2018 we were in New Jersey where we also had begun giving star words to members. My word was discernment. I began the year praying for the gift of discernment for our family's future. I kept the word on my desk where I could see it daily and stop and pray for God to reveal understanding to me. Within a few months, Mitch and I were beginning conversations with Grace Covenant. Discernment was the word of the day, every day. Through the process of conversation and prayer, we felt that this was where God was calling us. That star, placed where I could be reminded to listen for God's leading was certainly transforming in my life. I give thanks to God for the gift of discernment and the opportunity to serve as one of your pastors. It has certainly been a challenging time

-who could have imagined a pandemic! But even greater, it has been a time of great blessings, and you are one of them.

I hope that your star word will be transforming for you this year, and together may we work to transform the division and brokenness in our nation.

; Tisby, Jemar, "Christian Leaders React To The Insurrection At The Capitol Building,"© 2020, RELEVANT Media Group, Inc., January 7, 2021.

ii Green, Emma, "A Christian Insurrection," TheAtlantic.com Copyright (c) 2021, January 8, 2021.

iii Gjelten, Tom, "Faith Leaders Nearly Unanjmous In Condemning Assault On Capitol", NPR, © 2021 npr, January 7, 2021.