

“Little beats big when little’s smart. First with the head, then with the heart.” - Geel Piet to P.K. in the novel The Power of One

Matthew 2:1-12

Friends in Christ, good morning.

Maybe, just maybe, you look at this story through Christmas card glasses.

By that I mean this.

When we read this story, we see three wise men.

Their names are Casper, Melchior and Balthazar.

They are stargazers from the East, bringing gold, frankincense and myrrh to baby Jesus in the manger, under the star of Bethlehem.

We can see them here in our nativity set at TMC.

Do you know the tradition from the Catholic Church of ‘chalking the house’ for Epiphany?

#### EPIPHANY HOUSE BLESSING

It has been a tradition in the Catholic Church to bless chalk at the Masses for Epiphany, and then use the blessed chalk as part of blessing one’s home in the New Year.

The home blessing can be done as follows:

Using the blessed chalk, mark the current year and the initials of the Maji above the outside doorways of your home.

Place a cross between each of the letters.

Today it would look like this:

20+C+M+B+XX

(XX =last two digits of current year)

After completing the above markings,  
pray the following prayer:

May all who come to our home this year  
rejoice to find Christ living among us;  
and may we seek and serve,  
in everyone we meet,  
that same Jesus who is Lord of all people,  
forever and ever. Amen.

The legendary names of the three Maji are:

Casper, Melchior, and Balthasar.

The initials C+M+B also stand for ther Latin words,

“Christus Mansionem Benedicat” which means:

“May Christ bless this dwelling.”

The markings over the doors should be left all year round  
as a sign that yours is a Christian home.

This cool tradition comes from viewing this story from that Christmas card lens.

But this morning, I'd like for us to look at this story through Liberation Theology glasses.

“What is Liberation Theology?” you might ask.

It is a way to study God through the lives and works of poor people.

I learned about this was of talking about God and walking that talk about God from a book  
by Gustavo Guttieréz, A Theology of Liberation, first published in Spanish in 1971 and in  
English in 1973.

My grandmother Barton, who I called MaMa, gave me \$20.00 as a graduation gift when I  
graduated from seminary.

I took that gift into a bookstore and came across Guttieréz's book as a surprise.

So often God is a God of surprises.

The cover of the book struck me like lightning and shook me like thunder.

There was a picture of Jesus, formed into the image of a campesino, a dirt farmer in Peru, on a cross in the middle of a field.

I bought it.

It is a star of Bethlehem for me on my journey to find Jesus.

Guttieréz taught me, and is teaching me still, that God longs for liberation.

According to him, liberation has three main parts.

First, it involves the elimination of the immediate causes of poverty and injustice.

Second, it involves the emancipation of the poor, the marginalised, the downtrodden and the oppressed from all the things that limit their capacity to develop themselves freely and in dignity.

And third, it involves liberation from selfishness and sin, a re-establishment of a relationship with God and with other people.

So let's look at this story through these glasses.

Herod

In a little book that I keep in my library and that I love dearly, *A Third Look at Jesus*, Caesar is defined as, "Principalities and powers who work evil in the world...who exercise rule over individuals, over history and the world, causing sin, sickness, suffering, oppression, war, suffering and death."

We can see Caesar's principalities and powers who work evil in the world - who oppress instead of liberate - as our story begins in the second chapter of Matthew's gospel. We see it in the life and work of King Herod the Great.

In our story, Herod's actions cause poverty and injustice.

So our question is, how do we confront Herod, how do we stand toe to toe with him?

To do that, we can look at God's way of doing it through Jesus.

### Jesus

This is how Pope Francis describes the coming of Jesus into the world.

"Standing before the crib," says the Pontiff, "we contemplate what is central, beyond all the pretty lights and decorations. We contemplate the child. In his littleness, God is completely present. Let us acknowledge this: 'Baby Jesus, you are God, the God who becomes a child.' Let us be amazed by this scandalous truth. The One who embraces the universe needs to be held in another's arms. The One who created the sun needs to be warmed. Tenderness incarnate needs to be coddled. Infinite love has a minuscule heart that beats softly. The eternal Word is an 'infant,' a speechless child. The bread of life needs to be nourished. The creator of the world has no home. Today, all is turned upside down: God comes into the world in littleness. [God's] grandeur appears in littleness."

So we confront the GREATNESS of the Herod's of our world with our LITTLENESS.

Remember, in our story Matthew quotes from the minor prophet Micah who writes, "The LORD says, 'Bethlehem Ephrathah, you are one of the smallest towns in Judah, but out of you I will bring a ruler for Israel.'"

Bethlehem was considered a tiny, insignificant town.

It was little.

Instead of choosing the holy city of Jerusalem as Jesus' birthplace, God selected a town so small that it wasn't even listed in the registry of towns in [Joshua 15](#) or [Nehemiah 11](#).

Jesus' humble birthplace demonstrates that God's greatness is in littleness.

What does it mean for us to confront the GREATNESS of the Herods of the world with LITTLENESS?

To help us answer that question, we turn to the Magi.

Specifically, we turn to the actions of the Magi.

In our story, the Magi lay down their gifts on the ground around Jesus.

According to Niveen Sarras on the website Working Preacher, gold is a sign of kingship long associated with the gods, frankincense is a sign of wisdom, and myrrh is a sign of long life and healing.

If we look through this action with liberation glasses, we learn that we must lay down our privileges and take up the littleness of Jesus when we confront the greatness of the Herods in our world.

“Little beats big when little's smart. First with the head, then with the heart.”

To me, that looks a lot like this story I wrote for the Greenville Journal in my column 'The Classroom Window' a few years ago.

Virgil Morrison Jr. was a 68-year-old man when I met him. Everyone called him Junior, but there was nothing “junior” about him. He was 6 feet 5 inches tall and weighed 300 pounds. His eyes were milky blue like the Tennessee sky on a cloudless morning. His smile was toothless and endearing. His nose was the shape of a cucumber from a vine in the garden. His feet were size 16. His shoes looked like boats. He was balding, with clumps of white hair on the sides and back of his head, and the sun reflected off his bald spot and shined an aura around his face that made him look like a saint. He wore blue denim Liberty brand overalls.

If I close my eyes, I can still picture him wearing those overalls, rocking in the Hinkle rocker on his front porch, waving at me from his old farmhouse in Springfield, Tenn., just outside of Nashville, where I lived in the early '90s. Saint Junior in overalls.

You might think he'd have spoken with a deep, booming voice because he was a giant of a man, but you'd have another think coming. The first time we spoke, I lost my hand in his in a friendly handshake. I looked up at him and said, "Hello, my name is Trevor." He looked down at me and said, "Well, hello there. I'm Junior," in a voice so high-pitched and crackly it sounded as if he'd taken in a deep breath of helium from a balloon. That voice both startled and astonished me.

He never learned to read, add and subtract, or tell time. He couldn't carry on a conversation about history or current events or the future. He didn't go to school. There were no special education classes in his younger days in the countryside. He simply stayed with his momma and daddy and helped them on the farm. He lived each minute in the moment.

If you asked, "Junior, how old are you?" he would answer, "Lord have mercy, I can't remember!" The truth is, he didn't know.

If he needed to sign his name, he would ask, "Can you help me?" He didn't know how.

He did know about life, though. He knew more about life than many highly educated people I know. He knew more about life than me.

You know the movie "Forrest Gump," don't you? It was based on the novel by Winston Groom by the same name. Tom Hanks played the part of Forrest in the movie and won an Academy Award for his efforts.

In the movie, people call Forrest stupid all the time. He responds, "Momma always told me stupid is as stupid does." And what does Forrest do? He goes out each day with eyes full of wonder and a heart full of love. There's nothing stupid about that. This kind of childlikeness brings redemption to the troubled people, troubled places, and troubled times around him.

Junior brought that kind of redemption, too.

Here are some things I want you to know about him.

He loved watches. He couldn't tell time, but he loved them. He had a drawer full of them. He asked for one on each special occasion of his life.

My favorite memory about his watches comes from a Sunday morning at a small church. I asked the congregation to bow in prayer. I waited for several seconds before I began the prayer to allow a stillness and a quiet to descend on the place and on the people. At the

most still and quiet moment, a “Cock-a-doodle-doo! Cock-a-doodle-doo!! Cock-a-doodle-doo!!!” broke out. I thought a rooster had come into the church! I opened my left eye and saw Junior pushing buttons on his watch. I saw people around him pushing buttons on his watch. The “Cock-a-doodle-doo’s” kept coming until someone gently led Junior and his digital rooster out of the side door of the sanctuary. We all burst out laughing.

It was one of the greatest prayers of all time.

He held my hand when we crossed the street, and the memories of those tender moments still cause a small tear to roll down my cheek.

When we walked into the grocery store, people always asked, “Junior, how are you?” He’d respond, “I’m fine. How you doing?” I’d say, “Junior, everyone knows you. Who was that?” He’d answer, “Lord have mercy, I don’t know. But they’re my friend!” People always smiled when they saw Junior.

When I walked into the senior citizens center and he saw me, he would walk over to me, wrap me into his big arms, and lead me to the closest person to us. “I want you to meet my friend,” he’d say.

He was one of the best friends I’ve ever had.

If I spoke to a group and allowed time for questions and answers, he always yelled out, “You know, you couldn’t do without me!”

He was right.

Saint Junior, full of humility, wonder and love, I learned to listen to your life even though there was an absence of many words between us. Perhaps that’s the greatest thing I’ve ever learned: to listen to people’s lives, to listen to life itself.

You taught me.

Thank you.

You walked a humble, wonderful, loving path.

I hope to walk it, too.

We must lay down our privileges and take up the littleness of Jesus when we confront the greatness of the Herods in our world.

“Little beats big when little’s smart. First with the head, then with the heart.”



It also looks a lot like Jimmy Carter.

As you probably know, he passed away this past week.

As the 39th President of the United States, he held arguably the most powerful position in the world, he was the definition of the word GREATNESS.

I spent some time looking for some information about him in the local newspaper of Plains, Georgia - The Americus Times-Recorder.

A journalist from that newspaper, Joshua Windus, went out and about Plains to talk with local people about President Carter.

Here are some things he found.

(from the Americus Times-Recorder - "Plains locals share memories, inspiration, and grief after Carter's passing" - December 30, 2024 - Joshua Windus)

Plains locals shared memories, inspiration, and grief after the death of former President Jimmy Carter on December 29. Plains resident Penny Smith spoke of the scope of Carter's impact. "President Carter was such a big influence on people from all over the world. To the people in Plains, he was our neighbor, our friend." Smith told how he was a great role model, and that it was a pleasure serving on committees with him and Rosalynn Carter for the betterment of Plains. She shared a final message. "Rest in peace, Mr. Jimmy. Thank you for all you have done for Plains. And thank you for the great memories that you've given us. We love you." Kelly Kight and Jillian Williams, co-owners of Plains Sweet Stems, were putting up red white and blue ribbons in downtown Plains the day after Carter's death. Kight shared her feelings in the wake of Carter's passing. "It's a sad time, but it's also a time to remember him and all the good that he's done." She spoke of his effect on the local community, listing tourism and the showcasing of Plains in the national limelight. "Showing people that Plains is, you know, a community that cares about people."

When asked how the community was faring, Kight replied; "I think the community is proud of all that he has accomplished." She recounted the parts of his story that brought pride to Plains. "That he was from Plains, and that he was very hard working, and that he wouldn't probably have been what he is without Plains. Kight told how his legacy had drawn so many to the small town. "I think people want to share his legacy with their families, with their children." Kight is a teacher, and shares Carter's legacy with her own children. "One of my favorite things is to teach my children about Jimmy." Owner of the Plains Trading Post, Phillip Kurland, shared his reaction to learning of Carter's death. "Initially, I was stunned. We knew it was coming, but I had hoped we would be planning for the 101st birthday, and

then it dawned on me, why don't I accentuate the positive and all the good things he's done?"

Kurland spoke of Carter's lasting influence. "He's had a very, very good life. He'll always be alive in Plains, and right now my frame of mind is sad, but I'm happy for his legacy and the future." He shared Carter's greatest impact on Plains. "I think his biggest impact will be longevity of the success of Plains." Kurland told how Carter had impacted his own life. "The biggest impact he's had on my life is he's made me a much more kinder, giving, caring person."

Plains City Clerk Cynthia Bagwell summed up what most stood out to her about Carter. "Just an all-around good, good person." She shared how he valued others. "He always made you feel like you were important."

(Read more at: <https://www.americustimesrecorder.com/2024/12/30/plains-locals-share-memories-inspiration-and-grief-after-carters-passing/>)

What an example of laying down our privilege, for giving up our Gold, Frankisence and Myrrh for the course garments Jesus wore when he walked in Galilee.

We must lay down our privileges and take up the littleness of Jesus when we confront the greatness of the Herods in our world.

"Little beats big when little's smart. First with the head, then with the heart."

Claressa Shields

I've been so moved by pastor Jennifer and pastor Elaine's sermons the past two Sundays and the idea that we all need a fight song.

Mine is "No Surrender" by Bruce Springsteen and The E Street Band.

I'd like to introduce you to a fighter instead of a fight song.

Her name is Claressa Shields.

Have you heard of her?

I hadn't until Robin, Zeke and I went to see the movie "The Fire Inside" a few weeks ago.

The movie, directed by Rachel Morrison and written by Barry Jenkins, is about the early boxing career of Claressa "T-Rex" Shields.

Shields was born in March of 1995 in Flint Michigan.

The mean streets were especially mean to her.

Poverty had crushed her mother's spirit.

This caused her mom to turn to alcohol and street drugs to help her numb the pain of being without the things everyone needs for life - food, clothing, shelter, good public education, meaningful work, adequate health care.

That caused little Claressa to have a tough childhood.

When she was 11 years old, she ran across town, feet on the hot pavement in the Michigan summers and the frozen pavement in the Michigan winters, to Berston Field House, to ask Jason Crutchfield, the volunteer boxing coach there, to teach her to box.

When Claressa first expressed an interest in boxing, everyone told her, "No." Girls don't box, they'd say. It's a man's sport.

Claressa refused to listen. Instead, she showed up at the gym every day. That's a feat in and of itself, since she lived some distance away and didn't have any transportation beyond her own two feet. And she kept practicing until Jason Crutchfield, the volunteer boxing coach, finally agreed to teach her.

She won the gold medal for the United States in the 2012 Olympic Games in London at the age of 16. She became the first American boxer to win back-to-back Olympic gold medals in the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro. She has gone on to win multiple world championships in five weight classes. She has only lost one time in her boxing life.

Her 11-year-old self might well tell you, "Little beats big."

"I always tell my story because I want others who have felt broken to know they can make it."

(<https://www.pluggedin.com/movie-reviews/fire-inside-2024/>)

"Little beats big when little's smart. First with the head, then with the heart."

So, on this Epiphany Sunday, and for 2025, my star word is LIBERATION.

What is your star word?

To help you think about the answer to that question, we're going to give you a star with a word on it.

That can be your word for 2025.

If our little community at TMC can live out these words together, in community, for 2025 we can go a long way in standing up against the Herod the Greats in this world.

We can bring salt and light to those around us.

We can bring life.

May it be so.