

AN ADVENT DEVOTIONAL



What do you fear?

INSISTING ON HOPE THIS ADVENT

Art, Poetry, &
Reflections
for Advent

 *Sanctified Art*
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A Step Toward Home

I will not tell you to buck up,
to tough it out, to ignore the fear
rattling around in your chest.
I will not tell you that *all shall be well*
or that morning will come quickly.
I will not ask you to march into danger
without first repeating your name in my prayers.
But if fear stops you in your tracks,
if fear makes it hard to breathe,
hard to move,
hard to think,
then I will remind you
that even one step with shaking knees
is a step toward home.

Poem by
Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed



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Luke's Gospel begins the story of Jesus with this opening line: "In the time of Herod. . ." This detail may seem minor to modern readers; however, it reveals layers of information about the fearful world Jesus entered, one filled with rampant oppression, economic disparity, uncertainty, and instability. A world not so unlike our own. And yet, throughout the stories of Christ's birth, we hear the whispers of angels delivering a surprising message: "Do not fear." When Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, and the magi are each called into God's redemptive story, they do not deny their fears—they move through them. They ask questions, hold fast to courage, trust in good news, and say, "Here I am, Lord." When we find ourselves in fearful times, can we acknowledge our fears while also insisting on hope?

This Advent devotional takes seriously the angels' message and trusts that Christ's birth truly is good news of great joy for all people. The weekly art and reflections look closely at the fear and terror looming in the background during the time of King Herod and invite us to consider the fears we hold now. Fear can divide and paralyze us and even be used as a tool for oppression. But what if we formed a different relationship with fear? Can we acknowledge fear without letting it rule us? Might we catalyze our fears into love and action? What if naming our fears helps us see more clearly how God is breaking in and where God is at work?

Each week of this devotional offers art, reflections, poetry, and hymns to give you hope in a fearful world. As you journey through this season, may your hope become gritty and resilient. May you remember: hope that trembles is still hope. This season, let us insist on hope and trust that good news is greater than fear.

Artfully yours,

The Sanctified Art Creative Team

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About the SA creative team

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Prompts for reflection



IN THE TIME OF HEROD, WE LONG FOR GOD TO BREAK IN

As you enter the Advent season, what deep longings do you hold? Offer these yearnings and desires to God and trust that God hears and holds each one.



WHEN WE'RE RUNNING OUT OF HOPE, GOD IS AT WORK

Name what makes you feel hopeless. Offer your emptied hope to God. Then name where you perceive the unfolding of God's dreams. What do you hear? What do you see?



EVEN IN OUR FEAR, WE ARE CALLED FORWARD

Reflect on a time when you said "yes" to an invitation that scared you. How did you move through your fears? What did you learn or gain through that process?



WHEN YOU'RE AFRAID, GIVE ME YOUR HAND

When have you been a companion to someone through a fearful and challenging time? When has someone offered you the gift of accompaniment?

Throughout the season, return to these prompts to reflect on the weekly themes in this series. Use these questions to guide your journaling or discussions with others.



GOOD NEWS IS LOUDER THAN FEAR

Rev. Dr. Boyung Lee writes: "In a world where fear is curated and fed to us, proclaiming good news is a countercultural act." What joyful, good news do you want to lift up today?



LET FEAR FUEL A FIRE FOR JUSTICE

Reflect on a time when fear protected you from danger. As you enter a new year, commit to one action you can take to make the world more safe and just for everyone.



FEAR DOESN'T STOP US

List all of the fears that are bubbling up for you right now. Are there any that are holding you back or keeping you from living fully? Which fears are you acknowledging and moving through? Which fears might be at the threshold of transformation?



Epiphany | What do you fear?
FEAR DOESN'T STOP US

Choices to Make

There was a funeral in Charleston,¹²

a funeral for nine people killed by one gun.

There was a funeral in Charleston because the world is a scary place.

A violent place, a place full of Herods with pistols and broken agendas.

People could have stayed home. They could have locked their doors,

closed the curtains, buried themselves the way fear invites us to do.

We would have understood.

But instead, people came to the funeral.

They unearthed their hearts.

They carried the tenderest parts of themselves out into the world

where the sun could reach them, along with their fear.

They crowded the pews with black hats and mourning cries.

They sang “Amazing Grace” when the worst had happened.

In a world full of fear, we have choices to make—

bury ourselves and close the curtains,

or fill the church and choose to sing.

I’m not saying it’ll be easy,

but if you want to carry the tenderest part of yourself out into the world,

I’ll begin to sing.

Poem by

Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed

¹² This poem was inspired by President Barack Obama’s decision to sing “Amazing Grace” following the mass shooting at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church on June 17th, 2015.

Epiphany | What do you fear? FEAR DOESN'T STOP US

Read Matthew 2:1-12, 16-18
Reflection | Rev. Dr. Boyung Lee



We arrive at the end of the Advent
and Christmas journey,
and yet the world still brims with
violence, uncertainty, and fear.

The birth of Christ has not silenced
the Herods of the world.
Empire continues to rage.
The innocent still suffer.

The question, then, is not whether
fear exists—
but what we do with it.
Do we freeze?
Flee?
Or move forward, as the magi did,
refusing to let fear be the end of the
story?

Matthew's account of the magi
is often domesticated in popular
retellings:
exotic kings bearing gifts, bowing
before a glowing infant.

But Matthew 2 is no fairytale.
It is a political and theological narrative.

From the first verse, we are reminded:
this story takes place “In the time of
King Herod” (Matthew 2:1a),
a puppet ruler of the Roman Empire
known for violent paranoia.

Herod represents the worst of power—
one who responds to threat not with
humility, but tyranny.

The massacre of the innocents in
verses 16-18, echoing Pharaoh's
infanticide in Exodus 1,
shows how fear—untransformed—
can mutate into mass violence.

Into this volatile landscape enter the
magi.

They are foreign, Gentile, astrologers—
marginal figures in Jewish imagination,
yet the first to recognize Christ's birth.

Matthew calls them *magoi apo
anatolōn*—magi from the East—
without specifying number, gender,
or religion.

Christian tradition has masculinized
and royalized them—“three kings”—
but the term *magoi* comes from Old
Persian,¹³
and in Zoroastrian tradition, both men
and women could hold this title.¹⁴

Their journey disrupts not only
imperial geography
but also gender, racial, and
theological boundaries.

Their epiphany is one of radical
inclusion.

In seeking and honoring the Christ child,
they embody the very logic of
Matthew's Gospel—
a divine movement outside expected
places and people,
away from centers of power.

Matthew's Gospel consistently places
God's activity on the margins.

Jesus is born in Bethlehem, not
Jerusalem.
He is hailed by Gentile astrologers,
not the religious elite.
He is protected not by armies,
but by dreams and a refugee father
who listens to angels.

This is a different kind of kingdom—
a subversion of imperial logic.

The magi recognize the infant Jesus
as “King of the Jews,”
a title that terrifies Herod.

Their homage is not merely devotional—
it is political.

By kneeling before Jesus,
they make a bold and embodied
declaration: their loyalty lies not with
empire,
but with the vulnerable child who
reveals another way of power.

Fear permeates this story.
Herod is afraid.
Jerusalem trembles.

Yet the magi do not turn back.
They travel through uncertainty,
seeking truth.

After encountering Christ,
they return home “by another way”—
a phrase signifying not just a new route,
but a transformed life.

This is the power of epiphany:
not merely a moment of recognition,
but the beginning of a new path.

The magi become witnesses to God’s
new order—
not by heritage or status,
but through their bold seeking.

While the religious elites remain static,
the magi cross boundaries,
bow in humility,
and respond to revelation.

They do what Herod and his allies
refuse to do:
seek, kneel, and listen.

Epiphanies are not always warm or
personal.

Sometimes they are disruptive, even
dangerous.

Sometimes they lead to confrontation
with empire.

Sometimes they ask us to cross borders.
Sometimes they send us home by
another way.

And always, they ask something of us:

Will we move the way fear
makes us move?¹⁵
Or will we move the way love
calls us to?

Their journey becomes an invitation
to us as well.

Who are the magi among us today—
those willing to cross borders for
truth and love?

Who are the Marys,
holding the Christ child in fragile arms,
waiting for a knock at the door?

Who are the Herods,
terrified their illegitimate power
might be exposed by the light?

In the face of fear, let us travel together.
Let us defy empire not with swords,
but with solidarity.

Let us kneel in awe,
not before the powerful,
but before the powerless Christ,
whose birth marks the beginning of
God’s peace campaign.

Let us believe, with trembling hope,
that fear does not have the last word.

Because fear doesn’t stop us.
Love leads us forward.

13 Old Persian is one of the Old Iranian languages, known to its native speakers as “ariya.” It primarily appears in tablets and seals from the Achaemenid era (600 BCE–300 BCE).

14 To read an alternate version of this commentary, in which Dr. Lee imagines the magi as women, go here: sanctifiedart.org/blog/the-magi-a-feminist-lens-a-bonus-commentary-by-boyung-lee

15 This line references the poem, “Keep Walking,” by Rumi.



King Tingz | Nic Faison
Acrylic, paper, markers, synthetic hair on canvas

Epiphany | What do you fear? FEAR DOESN'T STOP US

Read **Matthew 2:1-12, 16-18**

Reflection | **Nic Faison**

For years, there has been a nasty practice of shaming indigenous practices, such as the usage of sage, or the spiritual use of herbs, metals, and the stars, while high church settings actively use incense in worship. For years, I have been reminding people that Jesus was gifted gold, frankincense, and myrrh by people who followed the stars to find him. That is the heart of my piece, *King Tingz*. I wanted to emphasize the sky and the importance of the stars, a reminder that this was essential to their witness.

Of the magi, the one bowing is marked with the flower of frankincense on their robe. On their left shoulder is a map of modern Persia, reminding us of their journey back home having to take a new route. They are crowned with cornrows and covered with more greenery because of their position to the ground. While we celebrate the stars, I wanted there to be some grounding to the earth. As Jesus is both divine and human, he holds space in both worlds.

The one to the right has soft myrrh flowers on her elbow and collar. Her outer arm is holding an infant, not Jesus, while her sleeve holds the Palestinian flag with the Arabic word *Nakba*,¹⁶ reminding us of the genocide of 1947. She is weeping for the children that Herod commits to murdering because of their defiance. Her golden crown is surrounded by a blue bandana, a quiet nod to Chola culture found on the West Coast, as Latino Christians have always emphasized the importance of *los reyes*.¹⁷

The one to the left is plated in gold. He looks up to the sky, more concerned about navigation, as he is the guiding force for the three of them. I gave this king a durag after some research on Persian magi showed me variations of headwear or turbans that emulated that of a durag.

Above all, if there is something I have learned from living in a Hispanic community and attending a Spanish-speaking church, it is that BIPOC¹⁸ communities do not play about *los reyes*. I wanted aspects of my culture and other American subcultures to be able to see bits and pieces of themselves in this art. But to also see our connection to the stars and the earth alike.

Prayer

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.

16 Meaning “the catastrophe,” this refers to the events of the 1948 Palestine war in which Palestinian Arabs were ethnically cleansed and displaced from their homes. These events continue to shape the ongoing Israeli-Palestine conflict.

17 Meaning “the kings.”

18 This is an acronym for “Black, Indigenous, People of Color.”

A Sanctified Art LLC is a collective of artists in ministry who create resources for worshiping communities. The Sanctified Art team works collaboratively to bring scripture and theological themes to life through film, visual art, curriculum, coloring pages, liturgy, graphic designs, and more. Their mission is to empower churches with resources to inspire creativity in worship and beyond. Driven by the connective and prophetic power of art, they believe that art helps us connect our hearts with our hands, our faith with our lives, and our mess with our God.

Learn more about their work at sanctifiedart.org.



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