

January 4, 2026

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Scripture: Matthew 2:1–12

Today is Epiphany Sunday. 12 days after Christmas. So fresh into the New Year we cannot even write the date correctly yet.

We've sung the carols, we've lit all the Advent candles, and we've rung in the new year. The nativity may still be on your shelf, and if you're like me, the tree and lights linger because you aren't quite ready to let go of the Christmas season.

I think I cling to it, because Christmas can feel like a brief suspension of the ordinary world, like the world agrees for a min to be gentler. We gather with family with more intention, we give gifts that we hope light up each other's faces. We rejoice anew at the miraculous birth of Jesus.

But eventually we have to turn back to reality, and that reality is that **the world looks a lot like it did before the calendar turned**. We have encountered the holy and yet the world is heavy with division and pain.

In the story we just heard from Matthew, Christ has been born. The LOGOs has entered the world in human form. Heaven has touched earth.

But the scripture includes a sobering detail that we often gloss over in our rush to get to a rejuvenating New Year's series, and that is this: **Herod is still king**.

That detail matters because it names something many of us are feeling right now. The year on the calendar changed, but the headlines didn't. The stress didn't. The grief and fear didn't. For all of us, we hold both **the devastating and the holy** closely together. And that doesn't disappear just because we've reached a new chapter. It is easy to feel heavy with the weight of all that is happening in the world around us.

We often tell the story of the Magi as if it's pure wonder—all shimmering stars, exotic gifts, and peaceful "silent night" energy. And yes, there is mystery and beauty there. But if we read the text closely, the story is also **threaded with threat**.

Herod doesn't respond to the news of a new king with curiosity or worship. He responds with fear and wrath. And we know what fear does to people in positions of power. Fear makes him strategic. And it makes him controlling.

He puts on a smile, asks for information, and meanwhile, he is making plans that will eventually cost a lot of people their lives.

This is the world Jesus was born into—not just into the sweet stable scene we romanticize, but into a world **where empire runs the land and kings feel entitled to everything**. It was a world where power hoards itself and where leaders protect their positions at the expense of the most vulnerable.

The scripture here calls us to **pay attention to this**. We are called to practice a kind of "holy attention".

For us today, that doesn't mean we are called to be consumed by the news or to live in a state of constant, unhelpful outrage, but **we are called to be aware**.

This means we face what is hard and we ask the hard questions: Who are we, as Love First UMC? How do we live out our commitment to putting love first when the "Herods" of our world—the systems of greed, exclusion, and fear—seem so loud?.

Maybe we can look back at the world that Jesus entered, strikingly similar to our context today, and **find wisdom we can lean into**.

I love that **of all the people God could have invited** into first fellowship with Jesus—God choose the Magi. These “three kings” from various locations. Of different cultures and customs. Outsiders really—and definitely not who the Jewish people would have picked if they had been in charge of the invite list.

Yet God prepares them a way. They look to the stars, and they also look to the earth. They encounter Herod and despite the danger, they refuse to let Herod be the final authority over their lives.

The Magi do not give up. They travel far. They ask questions. They keep moving, watching, and listening. **And this, I believe, is a great example of hope**. Hope is not blind optimism; it's not pretending "everything will be fine". Hope is the **radical decision**, over-and-over again, to keep moving toward the Light even when fear is lurking nearby.

Hope is embracing the **wideness** of God's love when forces tell us to do the opposite. Epiphany reminds us to honor our collective uniqueness – our different stories, wisdoms, and gifts. This was the theme at the very beginning of Jesus' life and should continue to be a guiding force for us today.

This is where our Star Words come in today. Just as God guided the seekers by a star—a Star Word is a tool to help us do the same.

Later in the service, you'll be invited to come forward and receive a word for the year.

When you get your word, I invite you to **really live with it**. If you love it, great. But if you *don't* love it—if it feels "pokey" or challenging—then I encourage you to live with it **even more deeply**.

Pray with it, argue with it, and pay attention to when it shows up in a song, a conversation, or a hard decision. Let it be a small star that re-orientes you toward God's presence. **This is how we practice hope**: by choosing, again and again, to listen for God.

This year, while prepping **the printed star words for all of you to receive**, I felt led to pull a Star Word for our entire congregation. One guiding word for Love First UMC. This felt particularly appropriate since we are in a pivotal season. We are in a time of visioning and discerning what God is calling us to do next.

So, I pulled a word, and the word I pulled for us was: Power.

I'll be honest with you—I was hoping for something else. I wanted something like "Creativity" or "Connectedness". Something fluffy and uplifting. But instead it was power. **Power feels heavy**. It feels uneven, uncomfortable, and even a little bit burdensome. But maybe that is exactly why it is the perfect word for us right now.

We all have power, whether we realize it or not. But we also know that power is not distributed equally. We can name the collective pain of communities that have been robbed of power—people of color, the LGBTQ community, and so many others.

As a church, we have spent years building a foundation of social justice and we have committed ourselves to being "Love First" in name and in action. We've worked to become a trauma-responsive congregation, influencing nearly every aspect of our church. Recently, we have also been working at a Conference level to spread the concepts of Trauma-Responsive church and leadership to clergy and laity all across the state of Minnesota.

With great intention, we've built music programs that nurture the soul. We've created spaces where everyone **from children and those we call "young at heart"** can grow in spirit.

We have **all** worked hard, together, using the great diversity of gifts God has given each one of us. And we have built a strong foundation.

And that foundation is fuel for our power. So, the question for us in 2026 is: **What do we do with this power?**

True Christian power is not about grasping for control or hoarding influence **like Herod did**. It is about using our power to be brave advocates for the isolated, lonely, and oppressed. It is a power that is **meant to be given away**.

In our community, how can we use our foundation to stand with immigrants and migrants? How can we focus our power to be a safe place for the Queer community? How can we use what we have to care for the land and for one another?

If these questions sound familiar, it's because **they are from the visioning work** we have been doing together. These **are just a few of the priorities** that have begun to emerge as the collective dreams of Love First.

In February, we will gather for a retreat **to turn these ideas into concrete actions**. And our prayerful request is that **every person of this church** will take time to reflect on where *your* gifts and *your own personal power* align with these priorities.

This is how we can live into hope, together as a church.

Towards the end of the Magi story, there is a line that is easy to miss. It says: after they worshiped Jesus, "they went home by another way". That small line represents a massive shift. Epiphany isn't just a celebration of "we saw a light". Epiphany is "the light changed our route".

In a reflection from Sanctified Art, Dr. Rev. Boyung Lee, wrote the following:

“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?
Or will we move the way love calls us to?”

Church, let us believe—with trembling hope—that fear does not have the last word.

The world of Christ was heavy and overwhelming, just like ours today. But **we are embolden and chosen by God** to be light bearers in *this* community and *in all of* the world. We will not be stopped by fear.

Love, God's Love, is leading us forward.

So today, when you receive your Star Word, receive it as a star for your road. A way to listen for God's voice when the world is being really loud.

And as we hold our collective word—*Power*—may we become the kind of church that does not cling to power, **but gives it away in love.**

Amen.