



# SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

January 6, 2019

"Follow the Star" - Hope Restored Sermon Series

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I think I've had it wrong my whole life. I thought Christmas was over on Christmas morning. Not true. Christmas Day is just the beginning of an almost two-week celebration of the greatest gift ever given. Today is Epiphany Sunday, which is the real end of the Christmas season, at least according to the Christian calendar.

At the beginning of a new year, life can seem a little lonely or dreary. Friends and family have flown home. Christmas trees have been taken down (except this one, which Shelley Germain has kindly kept up for us this morning), the lights have been packed away (except these) and the wrapping paper put in the recycle bin.

Kids have played with their new toys until they don't seem new anymore, and the New Year has come and gone. There's a pretty good chance that we've already broken a New Year's resolution or two.

Epiphany Sunday is the day when we remember the arrival of the Magi, the kings from the east, who followed a mysterious star that led them to Bethlehem and to the child Jesus. No matter how

many kings there were (there could have been more than three) their journey was a long one. The magi probably travelled 500 miles or more. One of the quickest modes of transportation in their day was by camel.

I've ridden a camel. I would not want to ride a camel for 500 miles. No way!

When the Magi stopped in Jerusalem to ask for directions, they heard the prophecies from the Hebrew Scripture (what Christians call the Old Testament). Specifically they heard the prophecies from the book of Micah. In the fifth chapter of that book, Scripture says, "*But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.*" (Micah 5:2, NRSV). That was the navigation information the Magi were looking for, Bethlehem was their destination.

In Matthew, chapter 2, verses 9 and 10, the Scripture says, "*The star that (the Magi) had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star,*

*they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshipped him*" (Matthew 2:9-10, ESV).

When the Wise Men arrive in Bethlehem, the Magi fall on their faces and worshipped the child Jesus. They did not do that for King Herod when they stopped in Jerusalem to ask for directions. But here, in the presence of Jesus, they seem to realize that they are in the presence of someone very special. Recognizing Jesus as King of Kings is the ultimate realization that anyone can have — and if you've realized who Jesus is, God come to Earth to save us, it's a life-changing epiphany.

An epiphany is a sudden insight into the true nature of something. When you've been looking at something for a long time, and suddenly realize that it is actually something very special, much more meaningful than you've ever really recognized, you've had an epiphany. You've uncovered something that was there all the time, but was hiding, in a sense, just below the surface.

**Y**ou can have an epiphany about your spouse, about one of your children, about a friend, about your work, or about your church. You can suddenly realize how remarkable each of these things or people really are in your life. You may have heard the story of Christmas again and again and then suddenly your eyes are opened and you see, almost with the eyes of a child, who Jesus really is.

We're continuing our sermon series through the Gospel According to Mark that we've called Hope Restored. In today's passage, we're going to see a startling contrast between the Magi and the religious leaders of Jesus' day. The Magi and the scribes, who were the religious leaders of his day, were focused on different stars.

The star the Magi followed led them to see Jesus for who he really is and when they did they humbled themselves in the presence of the child Jesus. The scribes were more concerned about being stars themselves. And what makes this so remarkable is the fact that the Magi weren't people who knew much about the God of Israel, And the scribes claimed to be the interpreters of the God of Israel to their people but really didn't know God at all. Jesus is going to painfully point out how much the religious leaders of his day had to learn about the God they claimed to worship.

**Mark 12:37b-40**

*37b And the large crowd was listening to (Jesus) with delight.  
38 As (Jesus) taught, He said, "Beware of the scribes, who like*

*to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, 39 and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! 40 They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."*

The crowd loved what Jesus was saying. He was taking on the stuffed-shirted scribes. In this passage Jesus challenges the scribes about a few things he'd noticed about many of them.

First, some of the them were apparently clotheshorses. They liked to walk around in flowing robes. The scribes liked these long robes because only the most notable people wore them. If you wanted to end up on the cover of Scribe magazine, you had to be decked out in one of these elaborate robes.

These robes were not functional at all. They were the kinds of robes that people could neither work in or be in a hurry. But that didn't matter to the scribes because many of them didn't really care about either working or being in a hurry. It was all about what these robes signified.

Jews wore tassels at the ends of their garment to remind them that they belonged to God. We sold or gave away hundreds of those tassels earlier this year. That's a wonderful tradition. But apparently, according to what Jesus says about the religious leaders in Matthew 23, some of them wore jumbo tassels as a way of drawing more attention to

themselves. They wanted everybody to remember that THEY were the super special part of the Jewish community.

I am not a clotheshorse by any stretch of the imagination. A couple of years ago, I was asked by a couple I knew from the San Francisco Bay Area to officiate at a ceremony where they would reaffirm their marriage vows. I think they'd been married for 38 years. They were going to be in Hawaii and this very small ceremony was going to be held on the grass at the Kahala Resort.

The night before the ceremony I asked the husband what he wanted me to wear? I'm going to call him "Mike". I told Mike I could wear a suit, I could wear aloha wear. He texted me a picture of what he was going to wear, shorts and an aloha shirt. I told him, I can at least match that.

It was a very moving ceremony as they reaffirmed their love for each other. After I prayed a prayer of blessing on the beach we headed INSIDE the resort I started to get worried when we didn't go to the outside restaurant but upstairs to Hoku's, I had never been to Hoku's at the Kahala.

As we walked up to the hostess she took one look at Mike and me and graciously said, "You can't come in here dressed like that." Mike immediately said, "No problem. I'll run upstairs and put some long pants on." I said, "It's going to take me two hours to get big boy pants on."

**S**uddenly the hostess said a sentence I had never heard in my entire life, "No worries. You're in luck. We have EMERGENCY pants available." She disappeared behind the counter and came out with a couple of possible pairs of long pants. Problem solved. We had a very nice dinner together.

I should have known better that we were probably going to end up in a restaurant INSIDE the Kahala and that shorts were not going to work but it didn't occur to me because I am definitely not a clotheshorse. So, Jesus' first objection with some of the scribes was, "Don't try to impress others with the way you dress. Don't be a clotheshorse" Some of you might be offended by this sermon already!

Here's Jesus' next objection: Some of the scribes really liked to be greeted by the people in the marketplace in a certain way. They demanded respect from the people and insisted on being called Rabbi or "teacher" but "Rabbi", literally means "My great one." The scribes wanted people to address them like that. It would be a way for the people to never forget who the truly great and important people were.

When I first came to Hawaii I was kind of taken aback when people addressed me as "Pastor" Tim. No one in California called me Pastor Tim. It was just, "Hey, Tim!" It took me a little while to learn to receive that greeting as a way of people showing me honor and respect. To be honest, it's humbling to be addressed as Pastor Tim. I suppose you could use all my titles when you see

me in Safeway. But I think addressing me as The Reverend Doctor Timothy Shaw in the bread aisle, would probably be over the top. For the scribes they were eager to be addressed as Rabbi because it was, for some, a way to feed their vanity and establish their power over others.

The scribes also like the good seats in the Synagogue. Right in front of the ark, the big storage closet where they kept the synagogues' copy of the Torah, there was a bench and guess who liked to snag those seats? The scribes loved sitting in those prominent places where everybody could see them.

A long time ago at First Presbyterian Church of Berkeley, where I worked before moving to Hawaii, we used to sit up front in four big chairs, facing the congregation. I quickly discovered that if you're going to sit up front, facing the congregation you have to be on your best behavior throughout the service. No checking you fantasy football scores. Sitting up front is a challenge because all eyes are on you.

I remember the morning when a soprano in the first row of the choir, suddenly fell out of the choir loft right at my feet. There was a modesty rail that ran the length of the chancel and on each side of the big pastor chairs were small doors that were less than waist-high. While we were singing the opening hymn, suddenly one of those doors flew open and a soprano tumbled out of the choir loft.

Fortunately she didn't hurt herself. She was only a little embarrassed. And to my surprise, I was actually able to maintain the proper pastoral demeanor as I helped her to her feet and we sang the next verse of the hymn. But in general, sitting up in front of the congregation is not a good place for me to be. But some of the scribes loved sitting up front in that place of prominence.

I was super thankful when we decided to sit in the congregation with the people, like we do here, and come up to the pulpit from the congregation. That is a much better place for me to be.

At big banquets, many of the scribes jockeyed for position, hoping to get seated closest to the host of the dinner party. The closer you were to that person, the more important you were. You could have a pretty good idea of where you fit in the social hierarchy of the community depending on the table number on your name card.

That's Jesus' opening critique of some of the scribes and he's just warming up. The crowd apparently loved it. For me, all of these charges are ones that just make me roll my eyes. I don't care about being seated next to the host unless they're the funnest person in the room. I'm obviously not a clotheshorse. I clearly should not be sitting up front facing the congregation under any circumstances. But Jesus is just getting started.

**A**nd what a contrast is emerging between the way the Magi viewed the world and the worldview of the scribes. The Magi fell on their faces before Jesus when they came to Bethlehem but the scribes do not recognize who Jesus is. They have not had their epiphany. They remain blinded by their own pride and their obsession with the power that they are eager to use to control other people.

Jesus then turns up the heat. He makes his most savage charge against the scribes. He says that some of them have devoured the lifesavings of widows in order to finance their opulent, privileged lifestyles. In Jesus' day, an expert in the law could NOT take money for the teaching he did. He was supposed to work at a trade to provide for his daily needs. But apparently, these experts in the law had been able to convince some people that it was their highest duty to help pay for a lifestyle. In fact, according to Josephus, a Jewish historian, some of these religious leaders taught that if you supported a teacher of the law it just might insure a better place in heaven in the life to come.

There have always been and there always will be religious charlatans who prey on vulnerable people. Some of the scribes were people who even exploited vulnerable women whose husbands had died. The death of their spouse put these women in a precarious situation in the 1st century and still some of these religious leaders exploited them.

Finally, Jesus has one more observation he wants to make about some of these men. Keep in mind that this is coming from God Himself in human flesh. This is the One who has had to listen to these men drone on and on during their prayers. The prayers these men offered were not really about connecting with God. They were crafted in order to impress others. They prayed so others would be in awe of how pious they must be. There is always a temptation for someone in a position like mine to try and impress and dazzle you when my primary task is not to point you to me but to point you to Jesus.

This is one of Jesus' most confrontational moments with the scribes. It's still true that some in the church seek a place of leadership because they see it as a place of prominence, a reward, something they are due, a role with privileges instead of the responsibility to serve the people of the church and the world around us.

When I was ordained as a pastor, I was given a robe, which does not indicate my piety or purity. In the Presbyterian Church this robe is an academic robe, signifying that I have completed a certain course of study. When I was ordained, I was also given what is called a stole. Every Sunday in Berkeley, I put on this robe and draped a stole over my shoulders. It did cover up the fact that I really am not a clotheshorse. But what was far more important was the stole reminded me that I am called to be your servant and a servant to others in the community.

This stole is designed to remind me of a towel. It's not something that signifies my holiness. It reminds me that Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, wrapped a towel around his waist and washed his disciples' feet.

Two ways of living have been set before us this morning. Will we follow the Magi to our knees and worship the King of Kings. And will we then follow the way of Jesus who gave his life in the service of others? Or will we follow the scribes who lived to impress others and exert coercive power over them?

Whatever place you find yourself in life, whether father or mother, boss or employee, mayor or president, pastor or elder, military officer or enlisted person, I want to invite us to follow the star that led the Magi to humble themselves before Jesus.

We are not called to be first or seek the place of prominence and power because as Jesus warned us, the first will be last. We are not called to exert power over others, to seek a place of privilege at the expense of others. We are called to come to the manger and see the All-Powerful One, who descended to us and was born a vulnerable child in a poor family, who became a refugee, fleeing from the threats of the powerful. That is the epiphany I believe we need today.

We need to see that if we are a follower of Jesus we serve a God who has redefined power.

**P**ower is not given to manipulate and control others but power is given in order to empower and serve others.

Is there a place in your life where the Lord might be asking you to be more humble? Maybe he's encouraging you to not be so worried about what people think about you. It just might be that he wants you to settle down into this unchangeable truth that you are a daughter or son of the King of Kings and you don't need the roar of the crowd or the approval of others.

Listen to how valuable you are to God. Receive his love for you as you consider this remarkable quote from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor and theologian. This is what God has done for you.

"The child in the manger is none other than God himself. Nothing greater can be said: God became a child. In the Jesus child of Mary lives the almighty God. Wait a minute! Don't speak; stop thinking! Stand still before this statement! God became a child! Here he is, poor like us, miserable and helpless like us, a person of flesh and blood like us, our brother. And yet he is God; he is might.

Where is the divinity, where is the might of the child? In the divine love in which he became like us. His poverty in the manger is his might. In the might of love he overcomes the chasm between God and humankind, he overcomes sin and death, he forgives sin and awakens from the dead. Kneel down before this miserable manger, before this

child of poor people, and repeat in faith the stammering words of the prophet: "Mighty God!"

The Christmas season may be ending today on Epiphany Sunday. The lights are being packed away. The presents have been given and received. But maybe there is just one more gift you can still open today, the gift this table points us to. Can you see, in your mind's eye, the gift of God coming to earth in the child Jesus to give his life that you and I might be forgiven and have everlasting life? The God we meet in that miserable manger is our Servant King. He wants to empower us to live lives that increasingly look more and more like his.

Merry Christmas!

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The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes. You may also request the audio version by visiting:  
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