



HAPPY
New Year



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Herb Montgomery

Happy New Year and Renewal!

Thank you for being such an important part of Renewed Heart Ministry's community and for partnering with us to further our work of love, justice, compassion and healing.

Your support during the past year enabled us to provide a faith-based foundation for labors of love and justice. It enabled us to provide people with connection and inspiration as we compassionately participate together in the varied work of justice within our world today.

Your support helped us reach our budget goals and will enable us this coming year, together, to continue being a ministry on the margins that prioritizes the needs of marginalized people, especially those who have been the recipients of misinformed, faith-based harm.

Whether within our larger world or within each of our more local faith communities Renewed Heart Ministries will continue to be a voice for change as we work toward a world that is a compassionate, just, safe home for everyone.

We could not do anything we do without you.

From all of us here at Renewed Heart Ministries, thank you.

We deeply appreciate your generous support.

HAPPY NEW YEAR.

Photo by Matt Hoffman on Unsplash



New episodes every Friday! **The Jesus For Everyone podcast.**

A weekly podcast where we talk about the intersection of faith and societal justice and what a first-century, Jewish prophet of the poor from Galilee offers us today in our work of compassion, love and justice.

[renewedheartministries.com/
Podcasts](http://renewedheartministries.com/Podcasts)



Upcoming Events

JANUARY 20, 2024
Good News Fellowship
Toronto, Ontario Canada

**For more info or the Zoom link,
email us at:**
info@renewedheartministries.com
or call: 304.520.0030





Epiphany, Baptism, Solidarity and Justice

by Herb Montgomery

This coming weekend our readings from the gospels are from Matthew and Mark. Let's begin with Matthew's story of the epiphany:

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

"But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel."

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had

seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route. (Matthew 2:1-12)

The first thing to note is how the author of Matthew appropriates and incorporates a famous Roman mythic event into the narrative of the birth of Jesus to lay the foundation for contrasting Jesus and his kingdom with Caesar and the Pax Romana.

The event that Matthew's author lifts from Roman storytelling is related to the Julian Star. In July of 44 BCE, a comet appeared in the night sky for seven days. The Romans interpreted it as a sign that the recently assassinated Julius Caesar was divine, and so it came to be known as the Julian Star or the Star of Julius Caesar. Caesar Augustus even put this star on the back of the Roman coins he made to bolster his claim that he was the "son of the Divine Caesar Julius."

Publius Ovidius Naso wrote in *Metamorphoses*:

"Then Jupiter, the Father, spoke..." Take up Caesar's spirit from his murdered corpse, and change it into a star, so that the deified Julius may always look down from his high temple on

our Capitol and forum." He had barely finished, when gentle Venus stood in the midst of the Senate, seen by no one, and took up the newly freed spirit of her Caesar from his body, and preventing it from vanishing into the air, carried it towards the glorious stars. As she carried it, she felt it glow and take fire, and loosed it from her breast: it climbed higher than the moon, and drawing behind it a fiery tail, shone as a star." (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 15:745-842)

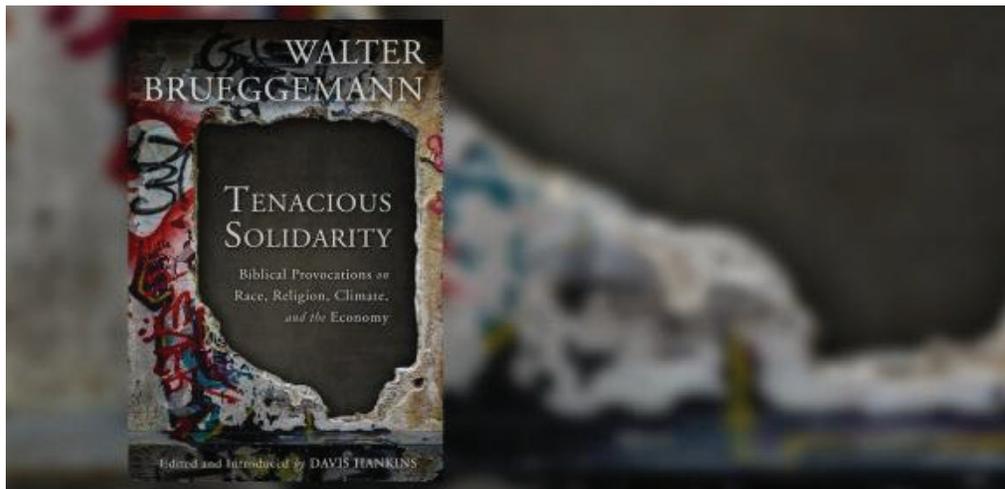
Here in Matthew's birth narrative of Jesus, the author states that another star (comet) appears, not at a caesar's death as a token of his divinity, but at Jesus' birth as confirmation of the claim that this child will grow up to be special too.

But those who follow the star are not Romans. They are Rome's closest enemies: Persians "from the east." Would their presence be interpreted as Herod conspiring with Rome's enemies? What did they mean when they said "king," and how would such talk impact Herod's standing with Rome if it escalated and was reported back? What is the narrative purpose of Jesus being recognized by Rome's enemies? What is the narrative purpose of baby Jesus being the victim of attempted murder by Rome's servant Herod, who was in charge of maintaining the Pax Romana in this region?

There is no stable in Bethlehem in this passage. The Magi find Mary and the baby Jesus at a house in Bethlehem.

Who were these visitors? In *The Liberation of Christmas: The Infancy Narratives in Social Context*, Richard Horsley explains that the Magi were the royal advisers and priests to Eastern Kings (Medes and Persians) (p. 57). This is no story of the personal piety of individual "wise men." When we understand this story in its historical context, we can see it was filled with political tension, and the Persian characters call our attention back to another ancient liberation figure in Jewish history: Cyrus. First, here are a few verses from Isaiah 44:24-45:25 regarding Cyrus as Jerusalem's liberator:

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RHM's Recommended Reading for January

Tenacious Solidarity: Biblical Provocations on Race, Religion, Climate, and the Economy

by Walter Brueggemann

Tenacious Solidarity features essays and new writings from 2014 to 2018. As all of Walter Brueggemann's writing is, the chapters are deeply biblical while also concerned with the identities, practices, and obligations of religious communities in contemporary contexts within the United States. Brueggemann consistently attempts to weave the biblical texts--vested as they are with the authority of a storyteller--into the deep contours of his readers' experiences, in order to foster a tenacious solidarity that might overcome both the psychic numbness cultivated by a 24-hour news cycle as well as the anxious possessiveness nurtured by so many

privatized spiritualities.

Brueggemann brings the "transformative potential" of the biblical texts to bear on critical contemporary contexts, including but not limited to economic disparities, racial injustice and white supremacy, climate and care for creation, and the power of memory and mentoring. He delves deeply in the Psalms, which he says, "provides a foundational script for living into the fullest and deepest realities of human existence." And he draws from the Prophets his foundational concept of totalism, which he defines as "automated fragmentation of social life such that we habitually and callously disregard our relations with others."

Epiphany... continued from page 3

"This is what the LORD says—
your Redeemer, who formed you
in the womb:

I am the LORD,...

who carries out the words of his
servants

and fulfills the predictions of his
messengers,

who says of Jerusalem, 'It shall be
inhabited,'

of the towns of Judah, 'They shall
be rebuilt,'

and of their ruins, 'I will restore

them,'

who says to the watery deep, 'Be dry,

and I will dry up your streams,'

who says of Cyrus, 'He is my
shepherd

and will accomplish all that I

please;

he will say of Jerusalem, "Let it be
rebuilt,"

and of the temple, "Let its

foundations be laid."

"This is what the LORD says to his
anointed,

to Cyrus, whose right hand I take

hold of
to subdue nations before him
and to strip kings of their armor,
to open doors before him
so that gates will not be shut:
I will go before you
and will level the mountains;
I will break down gates of bronze
and cut through bars of iron.
I will give you hidden treasures,
riches stored in secret places,
so that you may know that I am the
LORD,

the God of Israel, who summons
you by name.

For the sake of Jacob my servant,
of Israel my chosen,
I summon you by name
and bestow on you a title of
honor,...

I will raise up Cyrus in my
righteousness:

I will make all his ways straight.

He will rebuild my city
and set my exiles free,

but not for a price or reward,
says the LORD Almighty..."

What is fascinating to me is that Cyrus has his own birth narrative, too. When Cyrus was born, the Median Magi, royal advisors to Cyrus' grandfather King Astyages, interpreted the strange dreams Astyages was having to foretell that baby Cyrus would grow up to usurp Astyages' throne and become a great king and conqueror himself. We know today that King Astyages was the last king of the Median Empire. But at the time, feeling threatened like Herod in our story, Astyages tries to have baby Cyrus killed. The Jerusalem audience for whom Matthew was written would have understood the Persian Cyrus as more than the usurper of the Median throne. He not only became king of the Persian Empire but also liberated the Jewish people and authorized their return from the diaspora to rebuild Jerusalem (see Isaiah 44 and 45 above.)

Here in Matthew, then, as with baby Cyrus of old, Magi from the East show up to recognize Jesus and proclaiming that this baby boy will grow up to be "king" and liberator too.

All of these political details speak of the

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SOCIAL JESUS

A Blog Exploring the Intersection of Faith and Societal Justice



Last month's "Social Jesus" Blog on Patheos



Subversive Narratives of Advent, Part 1

If we are going to arrive at life-giving applications of this Advent story for our social context today, we must begin here.

patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2023/12/subversive-narratives-of-advent-part1/

Subversive Narratives of Advent, Part 2

It was an advent of a life-giving system in the here and now as an alternative to their system of economic extraction.

patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2023/12/subversive-narratives-of-advent-part-2/

Subversive Narratives of Advent, Part 3

This was an Advent of a gospel rooted in the Golden rule, enemy love, nonviolence, resource-sharing, wealth redistribution as restoration and reparations, and more.

patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2023/12/subversive-narratives-of-advent-part3/



Advent and the Joy of Working for a Better World, Part 1

In the stories, John the Baptist is dramatically associated with these ancient figures, and this association points the way of joy in Advent.

patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2023/12/advent-joy-of-working-for-a-better-world-part1/

Advent and the Joy of Working for a Better World, Part 2

These are symbols of long standing within the Jewish society at that time. They debated what fidelity looked like in relation to justice.

patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2023/12/advent-joy-of-working-for-a-better-world-part2/

Advent and the Joy of Working for a Better World, Part 3

As difficult as doing preparation work in the wilderness is at times, there is joy this Advent in knowing what you are preparing the way for.

patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2023/12/advent-joy-of-working-for-a-better-world-part3/



Advent and Change from the Margins, Part 1

This advent narrative element clues us in to the fact that the change will be coming from the margins or edges of their community.

patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2023/12/advent-change-margins-part1/

Advent and Change from the Margins, Part 2

This Advent, it's helpful to remember John's wilderness baptisms were economic and political as well as religious.

patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2023/12/advent-change-margins-part2/

Advent and Change from the Margins, Part 3

This Advent calls to us to pay attention to what's happening in our time on the edges, in the grassroots, the wildernesses of our own society.

patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2023/12/advent-change-margins-part3/



Advent and the Refusal to Lose Hope, Part 1

On this first weekend of Advent, I want to consider the discipline of refusing to lose hope.

patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2023/11/advent-refusal-to-lose-hope-part1/

Advent and the Refusal to Lose Hope, Part 2

Advent would've been a hard sell to say God's just future had come. They could much more easily attach their hopes on the future.

patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2023/11/advent-refusal-to-lose-hope-part2/

Advent and the Refusal to Lose Hope, Part 3

That hope is grounded in the reality that we can face those challenges together in more life-giving ways than we can on our own.

patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2023/11/advent-refusal-to-lose-hope-part3/

Testimonies

"Over 11 years ago, you presented at a series of meetings in our area. That was what pulled us (my wife and I) through to continue on a journey of following Jesus rather than a religion. We were at a pivotal place of deep personal crisis, ready to throw our towel in on God and religion. Inadvertently you gave us a third choice." – CH

"You started opening my eyes to a beautiful 'Love Family' in which we are all included." – SF

liberation hopes of the marginalized living under Roman oppression for whom the Gospel of Matthew was written. With the Matthean star, Jesus was to be placed on the same playing field as the Caesars. Through the presence of the Magi, Jesus was to be interpreted as a second Cyrus and a conduit of liberation for the oppressed. And just as Cyrus was a threat to Astyages long ago, Jesus now would be interpreted as a threat to the powerful, privileged, and propertied (including Herod and Herod's household), a usurper of the status quo, with liberation effects rippling all the way back to Rome.

The entire Epiphany narrative in



Weekly HeartGroup on Zoom Every Wednesday Night!

Each Wednesday evening, Glendale City Church hosts a Zoom HeartGroup led by Herb Montgomery. Our discussion each week will focus on the content in Renewed Heart Ministries weekly eSight articles and the *Jesus For Everyone* podcast published each Friday.

Each Zoom session will be on Wednesdays at 7pm Pacific/ 10pm Eastern.

To receive the link for the Zoom meeting, email us at: info@renewedheartministries.com

Matthew speaks of liberation and justice for those pushed to the undersides and edges of their society. It calls us to work alongside those same communities today and to work for change, for justice, for a world that is a safe, compassionate, and inclusive home for all.

Let's now take a brief look at Mark's story of Jesus baptism, since it also is part of the lectionary readings this coming weekend.

And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. And this was his message: "After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." (Mark 1:4-11)

My favorite part of Mark's version of Jesus' baptism is the way Jesus' baptism is tied to these words that Mark's audience would recognized from Isaiah:

"Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen one in whom I delight;
I will put my Spirit on him,
and he will bring justice to the nations.

He will not shout or cry out,
or raise his voice in the streets.
A bruised reed he will not break,
and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.

In faithfulness he will bring forth justice;
he will not falter or be discouraged
till he establishes justice on earth.

In his teaching the islands will put
their hope." (Isaiah 42:1-4)

The purpose of this delight, this upholding, this chosen-ness, is that this servant in whom YHWH delights and upon whom the Spirit descends will "bring justice to the nations." It's all for the purpose of "establishing justice on the earth."

As this new year begins, and we reflect on the liberation themes of Epiphany and the establishment of justice in the themes of Jesus' Baptism, where are we working for justice today? So many areas come to my mind.

Wherever we are working for justice in our world today, these stories remind us of the biblical witness that we are not alone. The God of the Exodus stories, the Hebrew prophets, and the Jesus of the gospels has always stood in unflinching solidarity with whichever communities and voices throughout the ages have cried out for liberation and justice. And we are with that God too, whenever we are standing in that same solidarity.

HeartGroup Application

1. Share something that spoke to you from this week's eSight/Podcast episode with your HeartGroup.
2. How does the Jesus story inform your own justice work today? Share and discuss with your group.
3. What can you do this week, big or small, to continue setting in motion the work of shaping our world into a safe, compassionate, just home for everyone?

Thanks for checking in with us, today!

I want to say a special thank you to all of our supporters out there. And if you would like to join them in supporting Renewed Heart Ministries' work you can do so by going to renewedheartministries.com and clicking "donate."

You can find Renewed Heart Ministries on X (or Twitter), Facebook, Instagram and Meta's new Threads. If you haven't done so already, please follow us on your chosen social media platforms for our daily posts. Also, if you enjoy listening to the *Jesus for Everyone* podcast, please like and subscribe to the JFE podcast through the podcast

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Epiphany... continued from page 6

platform you use and consider taking some time to give us a review. This helps others find our podcast as well.

You can watch our new YouTube show called "Just Talking" each week. Todd Leonard and I take a moment to talk about the gospel lectionary reading for the upcoming weekend. We'll be talking about each reading in the context of love, inclusion, and societal justice. Our hope is that our talking will be just talking (as in justice) and that during our brief conversations each week you'll be inspired to also do more than just talking.

If you teach from the lectionary each week, or if you're just looking for some thoughts on the Jesus story from a more progressive perspective within the context of social justice, check it out, you might like it. You can find *JustTalking* each week on YouTube at youtube.com/@herbandtoddjusttalking. Please Like, Subscribe, hit the Notification button, and leave us a comment.

And if you'd like to contact us here at RHM through email, you can reach us at info@renewedheartministries.com.

My latest book, *Finding Jesus: A story of a fundamentalist preacher who unexpectedly discovered the social, political, and economic teachings of the Gospels* is now also available at renewedheartministries.com.

Right where you are, keep living in love, choosing compassion, taking action, and working toward justice.

I love each of you dearly. ■

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**RENEWED
HEART
MINISTRIES**



The work of helping people find life-giving ways to live out their faith through love, compassion, and justice are needed now more than ever. At Renewed Heart Ministries, we provide resources of faith and healing with the aim of renewing hope and inspiring action as we allow the Jesus story to inform each of us as we work together to shape our world into a compassionate, just and safe home for everyone.

Renewed Heart Ministries is a 501(c)3, grassroots ministry on the margins that prioritizes the needs of marginalized communities, especially those who have been the recipients of misinformed, faith-based harm. Your support enables us to be a life-giving, healing light in our faith communities and continue to be a voice for desperately needed change.

You get to decide what shape our faith communities take and what voices get to be heard.

You can support Renewed Heart Ministries with a one-time gift or by becoming one of our monthly contributors. Your donation can be made online at:

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or by mail at:

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Lewisburg, WV 24901

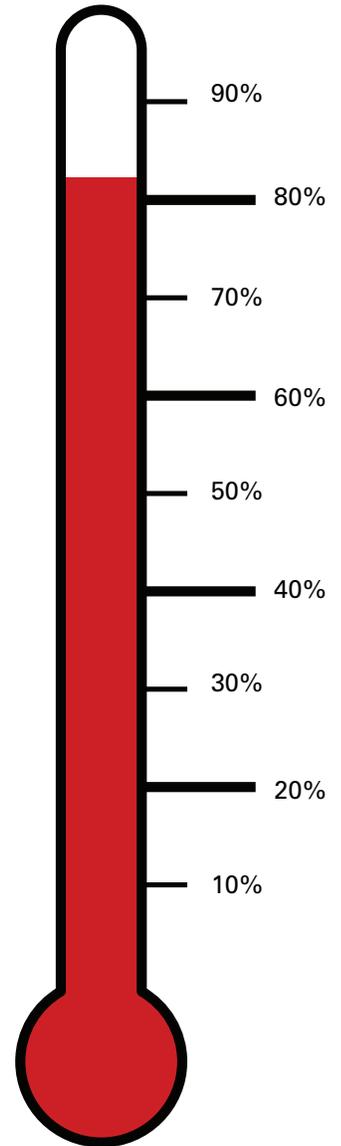
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Whether you give \$5 or \$5,000, every amount helps us to continue our work.

And **THANK YOU** for reading, listening to, sharing and supporting RHM's work. Thank you for the decisions you make every day to make our world a safer, compassionate, just home for everyone. Thank you for your dedication to engaging our world and the care you demonstrate, and for being such an important part of our community.

**2023 Projected Budget
Goal: \$150,000.00**

**Donations
Received in 2023:
\$123,977.26**



Finding Jesus!

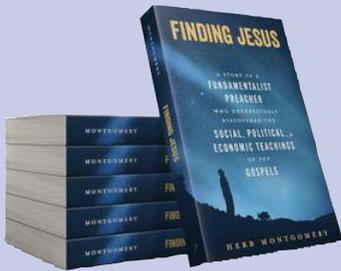
Herb's latest book, *Finding Jesus: A story of a Fundamentalist preacher who unexpectedly discovered the social, political, and economic teachings of the Gospels*, is now available at renewedheartministries.com!

Here is what one reader wrote:

"Your book is everything that I have been looking for! I need four more copies to share. I have some people I really need to give this to. I want them to read it, too!"

Pages: 210; Price: \$14.95 (USD)

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“THE NEWS, THE GOOD NEWS, IN THE GOSPEL NARRATIVE IS THAT THERE IS A THIRD PARTICIPANT IN THE DISPUTE ABOUT JUSTICE, NAMELY, THE GOD OF THE EXODUS, THE FATHER OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST WHOM WE NAME AS FATHER, SON, AND SPIRIT. THE TESTIMONY OF SCRIPTURE IS THAT THIS PARTICULAR, PECULIAR GOD IS NOT NEUTRAL OR INDIFFERENT, BUT HAS DECISIVELY TAKEN SIDES IN THE STRUGGLE FOR JUSTICE.”

WALTER BRUEGGEMANN
TENACIOUS SOLIDARITY

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Just Talking with Herb and Todd

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You can find the latest show on YouTube at: [@herbandtoddjusttalking](https://www.youtube.com/@herbandtoddjusttalking)

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