

What Opens Our Eyes?

Matthew 2:1-23

Home Moravian Church, December 28, 2025

How much can change because of a dream!

Many fields offer examples; here's a few from the scientific world. The structure of the benzene ring and the structure of the atom were discovered through dreams. The periodic table of the elements was created in 1869 when a Russian chemist named Dmitri Mendeleev literally dreamed it up. After months of speculating on relationships between the known elements, one night in a dream Mendeleev saw their names arranged into columns and rows on a chart. In the morning, he sketched the chart. His arrangement of the building blocks of matter would go on to become, itself, the building block of progress in chemistry, physics, mathematics, medicine, and the creation of the computer industry. See how our lives, our societies, the whole world, may change, when we are guided by our dreams!

A dream was important in the Matthew text Craig preached last week. A man named Joseph was faced with a social dilemma when his fiancée, Mary, turned up pregnant, and not by him. Guided by what his society would regard as proper, so he decided to quietly end the engagement—a decision that would have put Mary and her unborn son in danger. But then Joseph had a dream in which an angel of the Lord told him to go forward with his marriage. As Craig said, “The future of the world depended on Joseph’s choice”; and Joseph decided in favor of the dream.

As the story of Jesus’ birth goes on, the dreams keep coming. Today I read you some extra verses from Matthew’s birth narrative so that we could appreciate together the many interventions of dreams. Did you notice that the wise men from the east are guided not just by

the star we always sing about, but by a dream? King Herod tried to trick them into helping him find the holy child; but after the magi followed the star to the manger, they took a different road home because they had “been warned in a dream not to return to Herod.” Good call.

We might ourselves prefer not to return to Herod, in the literary sense. Why should this despicable character foul the Christmas story? Yet both Matthew and Luke give Herod a place of prominence in their stories of Jesus’ birth. Naming Herod helps them locate Jesus’ story in time—and offers a lesson, by way of contrast. To understand what these gospels want us to know about the power of God, we must understand what they tell us about the power of a king.

Matthew tells us that this king finds power in a lie. He finds power in flattery and show, smoothly styling himself as humble servant: “Go and find the child and tell me where he is so that I can go worship him, too.” Matthew also tells us that this king, so fast with a trick, *hates* to be tricked himself: “When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, he was infuriated.” And Matthew tells us that when this king is infuriated, he finds power in violence, raining it even upon his own subjects. Unspeakable violence: He uses the forces at his command to kill every boy two years or younger, in and around Bethlehem.

That Herod was capable of brutal murder is recorded history. He is known to have ordered the deaths of some of his own family members. But this massacre of children is recorded only in Matthew. Possibly the massacre is not so much *literal* as *literary*: the story is important as part of a larger lesson. Like other elements in Matthew’s birth narrative, Herod’s slaughter of male children echoes Pharaoh’s violence against Hebrew babies in the book of Exodus. Matthew reaches back to the Hebrew scriptures to link the story of Jesus to the story of Moses, which also contrasts the power of God with the power of a king. We learn from Matthew that a king uses power to oppress, to bully, to destroy; and that God uses power to save.

Matthew connects Jesus to Moses not only indirectly, through Hebrew stories, but directly, through Hebrew prophecy. When Herod asks the Jewish priests and scribes about the birthplace of the Messiah, they quote the prophecies of Micah. The holy family's nighttime escape to Egypt echoes the prophecy of Hosea: "Out of Egypt I have called my son." And when telling of the slaughter of children, Matthew recalls words from Jeremiah: *A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children.*

In Jeremiah, Rachel weeps over Judah's fall to foreign forces, the destruction of Jerusalem, the Jewish captivity in Babylon. In Matthew, Rachel weeps over Herod's destruction of Judah's children, clear-cut like trees in a forest; Herod sweeps away a generation just so he can feel safe on his throne. This, according to Matthew, is the way of earthly power: to clear away the vulnerable to make space for its own ambitions. Power can and does destroy lives for its own ends, or even just because a powerful person happens to be infuriated.

Rachel must still be weeping. Don't we want to weep, thinking of this world's children? A recent report from UNICEF describes some "460 million children living in or fleeing from devastating conflicts in places like the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Haiti, Lebanon, Myanmar, the State of Palestine, the Sudan and Ukraine." The report says that "children in these areas continue to suffer terribly They are being wounded and killed in their homes and communities. Their schools and hospitals are coming under attack. And they are losing out on access to the services they need – like protection, safe water, sanitation, vaccinations and education."¹

For good or for ill, the powerful of the earth hold the vulnerable in their hands. All over the world, the vulnerable suffer when their leaders use earthly power to serve their own

¹ "UNICEF Humanitarian Action for Children 2025 Overview," [humanitarian-action-for-children-2025-overview.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/humanitarian-action-for-children-2025-overview.pdf).

ambitions. Kings, prime ministers, presidents, legislators, captains of industry: their decisions make a difference in the lives of the poor—and a whole lot of the poor are children. How many of those children are poor because those in power expend national resources in wars over borders, resources, and the supremacy of their own cause? How many children die when the dreams of the powerful differ starkly from the dreams of God?

What did *Herod* dream about? Matthew's story is silent on the matter; but if we, like Matthew, reach back to the Hebrew prophets, we find this in Micah 2: "Woe to those who devise wickedness and evil deeds on their beds! When the morning dawns, they perform it, because it is in their power."

The powerful have the power to set their dreams in motion. The Hebrew prophets show what that motion too often looks like: as Micah goes on, "They covet fields and seize them, houses and take them away; they oppress householder and house, people and their inheritance."

But theirs are not the only dreams; and theirs is not the only motion.

Look again at Jesus' birth story. While Herod plotted evil on his bed, God sent dream after dream to Joseph, dreams in which angels guided him and his family to safety. A man with no worldly position of power, Joseph nevertheless had the power of his dreams; the power to pay attention to their meaning; and the power of faith to follow them. And so the world was changed, not by a king's power to hurt, but by God's power to save, in the person of Jesus Christ.

All through history, dreamers have set their dreams in motion through the power of faith, the power of love, the power of God. We can name examples from our own time: Rev. Dr. King, of course, and President Nelson Mandela: each had a dream of racial equality that changed his nation. Malala Yousafzi of Pakistan had a dream of equal education for boys and girls, which led

to the ratification of Pakistan's first Right to Education Bill, and made Malala the youngest winner of the Nobel Peace Prize.

These are obvious examples; but likely each of us can name examples from our own small circles. We have all known people who heard in their dreams a call to righteousness, justice, and peace, and who recognized in that call a power for good. A power that has put dreams in motion for the good of the world, in spite of great odds, again and again. A power, even, to save. We have seen God's power save, and we will see it again.

When Matthew calls up Hebrew stories of wicked kings and Hebrew prophecies of power gone wrong, he does more than connect Jesus to Moses. He reminds his readers—he reminds us, today—that the world has seen all this before. Rachel's weeping, in this text, is actually bracketed by two references to the death of Herod, reinforcing the lesson that earthly rulers come and go. By the end of Matthew's gospel, though, we will understand that Christ Jesus lives forever.

We will not always know what to do with our dreams. When Mendeleev sketched out the periodic table, it was just a start. You can see the original sketch online. It is full of cross-outs and changes, with notes scrawled in the margins. The great neurologist Oliver Sacks, who delighted in the periodic table and the story of its creation, says that this sketch “shows ... that Mendeleev did not awake from his dream with all the answers in place, but ... with a sense of revelation.”²

What do our dreams for the world reveal? As earthly powers roil the world, do we dream of peace? Of love? Of a world where children thrive? Then let us pay attention to how God

² Oliver Sacks, *Uncle Tungsten: Memories of a Chemical Boyhood* (New York: Vintage, 2002), p. 199n.

speaks to us through these dreams. Though we wake without all the answers in place, all we need to get started is a sense of revelation. That's what opens our eyes. Amen.