

Pastoral Message: Faith demands another path

Bishop Cedrick D. Bridgeforth • January 9, 2026

Transcript

Even though I serve as your bishop, I remain a pastor at heart. The events of the past few days, and perhaps even the past year, have been difficult for many. We grieve what has been lost, push through spiritual, emotional, and physical exhaustion to continue to offer words of hope and advocacy, and fear what is and what may be.

I want to share ‘Taken Home by Another Way’ from Matthew 2:1-12.

The Magi follow a light, they kneel in awe, they open their treasures, they worship the Christ child. And then, almost in passing, the Gospel tells us something that is anything but small.

It says, “Having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they went home by another way.”

No argument, no negotiation, no attempt to soften harm by cooperating with power. They simply listened and changed their route home.

What captures me is their response. They refuse to go back the same way. They refuse to return to power that lies. They refuse to serve a ruler who would use their obedience to harm someone else.

This is a fundamental truth of faith. Faith is not only about finding Christ. Faith is about what we do afterward. Faith is not only about arrival. Faith is about return.

And sometimes genuine faith means you cannot go back. Not to old habits, not to comfortable silence, not to systems that once felt normal but now clearly participate in harm.

Because after encountering Christ, complicity is no longer an option.

We live in a moment when fear is being created on purpose. Rhetoric, policies, and actions like the shooting and terror inflicted on our neighbors communicate to certain neighbors that their lives do not matter, that their safety is conditional, that their humanity is negotiable.

Families are afraid. Communities are shaken. And far too often, people of faith have watched quietly, hoping someone else would say something.

But Herod still lives wherever fear is weaponized. Herod still speaks whenever human dignity is questioned. Herod still rules whenever systems claim authority while producing violence.

And Matthew's Gospel is clear. The Magi did not return to Herod. They did not cooperate with cruelty. They did not lend legitimacy to a ruler who intended to harm the vulnerable. To return would have been to participate.

God is saying to the church, you cannot go back that way. Not after you have seen Christ, not after you have proclaimed love, preached grace, sung liberation, prayed protection, and then watched your neighbors live in fear. Faith demands another way.

The text reminds us that the warning came after worship, after joy, after the beauty of holy encounter. Meaning the most disruptive, courageous instructions from God often come when we feel most spiritually secure. We assume the sacred will be comfortable, but sometimes encountering Christ rearranges your map. Sometimes real faith costs something: safety, familiarity, approval, predictability.

And yet, this is not simply about courage, it is about protection.

Our United Methodist congregation in Blackfoot, Idaho published a devotional book for us this year. And the January 6th entry included a quote that God often redirects us for our protection and God's glory.

Faith communities in Portland and beyond are being asked a faithful question this Epiphany season. How is God inviting us to take another path for God's glory and our neighbors' safety?

Not just another path of belief, but another path of public witness, another path of presence, another path of solidarity. A path that refuses to bless fear-driven policies. A path that refuses to normalize violence against communities already living under pressure. A path that refuses to return to Herod with a report that says, "We saw nothing, we did nothing."

God does not need our sentiment. God needs our obedience. God needs our courage. God needs our refusal to cooperate with harm. Because once you have encountered Christ, you cannot return unchanged. Once you have looked at love in the face, kneeling like the Magi, you cannot go back to a world where anyone's humanity is optional.

So, I invite United Methodists in Portland and every faith community listening. Let this Epiphany season not be decorative. Let it be directive.

Stand with those who are afraid. Speak against rhetoric that dehumanizes. Challenge policies and practices that do harm. Refuse to cooperate with cruelty disguised as law and order. Choose a path that honors Jesus instead of Herod.

And let us pray, not as a closing, but as a decision.

And our prayer is this:

God of new paths, teach us courage.

Lead us away from fear and toward faithful obedience.

Do not let us return to ways that harm our neighbors or deny their worth.

Take us home, not by the easiest way, not by the safest way,

but by the way that honors Christ

and protects the people you refuse to abandon.

This we pray in Jesus' name.

Amen.