

I. Advanced Organizer

- A. **The first time I can remember January 6th** being a notable date on the calendar came sometime in my young adulthood after I began to personally identify as a Christian. Though it had not been a tradition my family had observed growing up, as an adult I learned that for a number of Christians, Christmas was understood not to be only one day at the end of December, but a period of celebration: twelve days of marking the birth of Jesus beginning with the celebration on December 25th and concluding on January 6th with **the festival of Epiphany**. I came to appreciate the invitation to linger in the celebration a bit longer, and allow it to take us into the new year. Here at Haven we have in different ways often at least noted this tradition in early January, sometimes teaching on the stories at the center of Epiphany, sometimes engaging practices connected to it.
- B. And then three years ago, the date of January 6th took on an altogether new and novel meaning. There were hints of what might come when the former president of the United States Donald Trump, who had just lawfully lost his reelection campaign to Joe Biden, tweeted an invitation to his followers just a week before Christmas: “Big protest in D.C. on January 6th. Be there, will be wild!”
1. The rest is of course now the stuff of history. **January 6th, 2021 is the date that a violent mob of US Citizens attacked their own capitol**, trying to stop the lawful certification of the presidential election for Joe Biden that was taking place in a joint session of congress. They were doing this in response to and encouraged by the former president who was desperate to hold onto power. While they were ultimately not successful in overturning the results of the election, the mob did significant damage. A rioter was shot and killed that day. Two Capitol police officers lost their lives in the melee. Other officers took their own lives in the following weeks, so distressed they were by the trauma of their experiences there. In the last three years, over 1200 people have been arrested in connection to the January 6th attack on the capital, and the justice department continues to pursue cases. Around 900 have pleaded guilty or been convicted; many are serving time in prison. Hundreds of other cases are pending. By the time they’re done, there could be double the amount of defendants involved.
 2. When we were watching the coverage of the mob of people breaking through the barriers and storming into the capitol three years ago, I remember **feeling aware of a kind of haunting irony, that this event was taking place on Epiphany**. Soon after the event was underway, I found myself on a Zoom call with a few others like Connie and Sylvia who wanted to connect and pray for what was happening, and we reflected on this irony together. **Epiphany is a celebration around the idea of sacred revelation** - Christians often use the day or the season of epiphany to think about moments of clarity that reveal God’s presence in a significant way - whether it’s the moment the Magi appear having followed a star that has revealed to them the Divine presence in the birth of a child, or it’s the moment that a carpenter walks into the Jordan river and a voice booms from heaven as a dove descends. These are moments of miraculous encounter, of something hidden being revealed. As we prayed on January 6, we prayed that ultimately that would be what was happening: that **this terrible event would bring with it its own heartbreaking but necessary epiphany**. Perhaps this event would be the event that revealed how dangerous the former president’s lies had become. Perhaps this would be the event that broke the thrall Trump had over his followers.
- C. Three years later, **I still believe that the events of January 6th**, along with their aftermath, **were revelatory**, but it’s also true that the thrall remains. I stand here today at the beginning of 2024 with, if I’m honest, a measure of existential dread. Another presidential election looms

roughly 10 months away, one that in spite of what I think many have hoped would be the case over the last three years, looks to likely be a repeat of the same match-up we had four years ago, but with two candidates more weathered than they were before, including one who **himself is facing charges for his activities on January 6th** among other criminal charges, and an American public potentially more cynical, more frustrated, and more divided in their understanding of the truth, including the very real stakes for democracy should Donald Trump return to the White House. **On the national scene, it looks to be a challenging year.**

- D. This year also starts as the death toll continues to mount in the Middle East, and concerns grow that the war in **Israel and Palestine** will grow beyond those borders. Calls for a ceasefire are becoming more urgent as half the population of Gaza faces starvation. Meanwhile over 100 hostages from Israel are still being held captive. The situation may be complex and difficult to navigate, but the human need for a better, safer way forward can't be denied. And this is only one of the spots beyond our borders that cries out for our compassion and care: war still wages in Ukraine as well. Isis is bombing funerals in Iran. **On the international scene, it looks to be a challenging year.**
- E. As I've been looking towards this year with concern and prayer in recent weeks, I have heard a phrase resonate through my mind. Whether it is the whisper of the Spirit or my own longing, I can't say for sure, but it's continued resonance causes me to share it and invite all of you to ponder it's potential call for us this year: **"blessed are the peacemakers"** I find myself hearing. **"Blessed are the peacemakers"**.
- F. These words of course are words that our tradition attributes to **Jesus himself**. In the passage of Matthew we've come to call the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus shares a list of blessings, commonly known as the beatitudes. In the midst of these he says, **"Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God."**
- G. In the midst of so much rancor, so much violence, so much injustice, such high stakes - **what does it mean to be a peacemaker?** What could Jesus have been calling his followers to? What did he expect of them? What does he expect of us? And how might living into that identity bless the world around us? **How might it demonstrate a kinship with the Divine that serves to impact the world around us for the better?**
- H. **I don't think Jesus was talking about conflict avoidance** - simply staying on the sidelines or keeping our heads down while injustice and violence continue unchallenged. Though if I'm honest, that might be my personal preference at times, I believe Jesus was actually calling us to something more challenging and also more sacred, **to some kind of non-violent conflict engagement and transformation**. This is what I hope to explore and ponder this year as we consider together what it means to **make peace in 2024**.
- I. And I thought perhaps we might start by coming back to the tradition of Epiphany, and considering afresh a story at the heart of it. So why don't you read with me from the 2nd Chapter of Matthew, as we ponder how this story might ring at the beginning of this year, and what it might have for us in this season.
- II. (Encountering story)
- A. 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."**
- B. 3 When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. 4 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. 5 "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:**

- C. 6 *“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.”*
- D. 7 *Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. 8 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.”*
- E. 9 *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. 10 When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. 11 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. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.*
- F. So this is a story that many of us are, no doubt, very familiar with - it lies at the heart of Christmas lore.
1. We have some familiar characters:
 - a) **The young family - young Jesus, Mary, and Joseph.** This story locates them in Bethlehem, but does not place them in a stable. It seems to imply they are residing in a home there. By the time the magi arrive, it is likely months, if not more than a year after the child has been born, just given the logistics of what it would have taken in that day to engage the kind a pilgrimage the story describes.
 - b) **We have King Herod, a Jewish leader that rules the province** with the support of the Roman Empire who actually occupies the whole region. Beyond the New Testament stories, other historical accounts verify that Herod was a jealous tyrannical ruler, who grasped tightly at power and was unafraid to use violence to hold onto it. He was said to have killed a number of his own family members - including a wife and multiple sons - because he felt threatened by them.
 - c) We have the **“chief priests and experts in the law”** as Matthew describes them - religious leaders of the day that Herod calls upon for information.
 - d) And there’s of course the characters at the heart of the narrative - **the Magi from the east.** While we can’t know for sure, most scholars have come to believe that these were likely Zoroastrian Priests - religious leaders coming likely from what we would now identify as Syria. Astrology and its discerning of the stars was a core component of their spiritual tradition. Notably, these magi are not Kings, nor is it clear there are three of them - these are traditions that have been built on to the Christmas story over time but are not actually part of Matthew’s story. Matthew simply calls this group of travelers “Magi”, a word that can be translated “wise people” but also includes a connection to the supernatural, or one might say “magical”.
 - e) Many Christians throughout history have pointed to the visit from the Magi as a foreshadowing event - a sign of what’s to come with the eventual ministry to Gentiles that will be core to the early spread of Christianity after Jesus’s earthly life.
 - f) But today, I’m more interested in reflecting on **what is revealed by the beauty of how these Magi conduct themselves**, and how they are a part of a bigger thread in our Jesus-centered tradition that we would do well to notice and perhaps to emulate as we consider peacemaking in our world today.

2. Several weeks ago, the small group that Joanna and I were leading this fall had our fourth and final meeting, one in which we discussed the question of how, as people of faith, we might think about **our relationship to other faiths, or folks who claim no faith at all**. As I think most of us would acknowledge, this is not something Christianity has always done well. Too often, Christians have engaged those of other spiritual orientations with **an exclusivist and triumphalist perspective, expecting others to convert to their way or perhaps be swallowed up by it**. For centuries, the church has unfortunately partnered with the state, effectively giving spiritual cover to the colonialist and capitalist projects of Empire Building, and we are right to reject that way of being in the world and work to repair the harms that history has caused. This of course informs a core part of why we engage this Haven project - we are seeking to build **an alternative kind of spiritual community, one that cares about creating safety and honoring diversity, while also centering on Jesus and the tradition he anchors as our spiritual orientation**. This may mean, at times detaching from some problematic traditions we've inherited while we try to discern how the presence of Jesus may actually call us in a different direction.
3. **Barbara Brown Taylor is an author, religious professor and Episcopal Priest**, and in preparation for our recent small group conversation on inter-faith connection, I read one of her books from recent years. It was titled, ***"Holy Envy: Finding God in the Faith of Others"***. In this book, Barbara Brown Taylor describes how her own Christian faith was renewed through decades of teaching a comparative religion class to undergraduate students, which included taking the students on field trips to visit Mosques, Synagogues, Buddhist Temples and more. While many of the Christian students initially expressed concern with visiting these sites of other faiths, and participating in some manner in the practices there, inevitably the class was expanding and inspiring for all involved, and Barbara Brown Taylor was transformed through her decades of teaching it perhaps the most. Much of the book is spent telling stories of the encounters that her and her students had in various religious spaces, and how that broadened their thinking about the world, about others, and ultimately about God. For many involved, including Brown Taylor, **this engagement with other faiths helped deepen the connection that folks had to their own Christian faith, rather than diminish it**.
4. In one chapter, Barbara Brown Taylor described how this engagement with other faiths caused her to **read Scripture in a different way**.
 - a) *In particular, I looked for stories that supported Christian engagement with religious strangers—not as potential converts but as agents of the God who transcends religion and never met a stranger. Beginning with the Persian magi in Matthew's Gospel and ending with the Roman centurion who recognizes Jesus as the Son of God, the Gospels are full of such characters—people who come from beyond the tribe to bless the tribe and then return to where they came from. In Judaism they are called "righteous gentiles." I do not know what they are called in Christianity, but Jesus receives them more than once, whether they come from Samaria, Syrophenicia, Canaan, or Rome. In story after story, they enter stage left, deliver their blessing on the Christian gospel, and exit stage right, leaving their mark on a tradition that is not their own. If it is easy for Christians to overlook the "otherness" of these religious strangers, then I think that is because we assume that once they enter our story they never leave it. In gratitude for their blessing, we baptize them as anonymous Christians. We make them one of us. A few do join us, but this is not the norm. In the case of the Persian magi, their appearance in Bethlehem is as surprising as a delegation of Methodist*

bishops arriving in Dharamsala to recognize the next incarnation of the Dalai Lama. Once they deliver their gifts to the starlit Hebrew baby, they go back to where they came from, presumably to resume their vocations as Zoroastrian priests. Yet every Christmas we sing of them in church, as if they had never left.

- b) This, to me, seems like a profound observation Barbara Brown Taylor is making about our Epiphany Story. These Magi are, as she says, **religious strangers**. They may be the first to, of their own accord, come and worship before the Christ child, but that does not make them Christians. And I believe **that's a beautiful truth in the midst of the Jesus-centered tradition** - our faith can be profoundly impacted by the gifts and contributions of others. **To receive those gifts and to allow the voices of others to shape us by their wisdom does not diminish our own faith**; it expands it, as we are invited to perceive the Divine from new points of view, and to find in religious strangers something that is also familiar and shared - we are both humans grappling with sacred mysteries that are in some way beyond us all.
- c) Those Zoroastrian priests **did not discern the Sacred presence in Jesus by studying Hebrew Scriptures** - that was the task of the chief priests and teachers of the law. They discerned something sacred through **their own rituals and practices** - rituals and practices that no doubt many of those religious leaders Herod consulted, as well as many Christians in our time, would look at with suspicion, if not fear, calling them **sorcery and witchcraft**. But Matthew does not chide these Magi for their sacred knowledge by another tradition. Nor does Jesus when he encounters those outside his religious community. Rather, he seems to embody the tradition that is woven throughout the Hebrew Scriptures as well of **welcoming and loving the stranger**.
- 5. The title of the book I've been referencing is "**holy envy**". This phrase is inspired by the work of **Krister Stendhal**.
 - a) Krister Stendahl was a 20th century theologian, bishop of the Church of Sweden in Stockholm, and eventually the Dean of Harvard Divinity School. One of the legacies Stendahl is best known for comes from his time as the Bishop in Stockholm, when he famously coined three rules for what he called "**religious understanding**". I think all of them are worth our consideration as we discern how we want to relate to folks from other traditions. Stendahl taught the following:
 - (1) When trying to understand another religion, you should ask the adherents of that religion and not its enemies.
 - (2) Don't compare your best to their worst.
 - (3) Leave room for holy envy.
 - b) So what did Stendahl mean by "holy envy"? In an interview later when he was in the US, he described it this way: "**when we recognize something in another tradition that is beautiful but is not in ours, nor should we grab it or claim it**. We Americans in our imperialism think that if we like something we just incorporate it and we think that we honour others by doing so. But that is not the way. **Holy envy rejoices in the beauty of the others.**"
- 6. When Barbara Brown Taylor is celebrating the religious stranger - whether they are the Magi in Matthew, a Roman centurion, or a Hindu Priest who welcomes her class to his temple, she is practicing **holy envy**. It is the envy that seeks not to conquer another's tradition but to learn from it, to value it and to honor it.
- G. Friends, in this year where we are being pulled into numerous conflicts that we didn't choose but that we must not avoid, I wonder if there might be an epiphany gift for us in this invitation

from **Krister Stendhal and Barbara Brown Taylor to holy envy**. Clearly not every perspective coming from those we might consider strangers is a gift to us, nor is every claim another might make one we need to honor ourselves. But I do think that part of Jesus' blessing us as peacemakers includes his invitation to love the stranger, and in that, to leave room for holy envy. What if, as people of faith, we could be known not as those who further entrench tribalism, but those who reach across perceived boundaries of belief and tradition to acknowledge shared humanity, to learn from other's cultures, to sojourn at times into another's world bringing the gifts of value we have to contribute, and to receive with grace and wonder the gifts given to us.

- H. Some of you have heard me speak of one of the most sacred experiences I've ever been a part of. It didn't happen in a church or any other Christian setting. It took place in a yurt in Southern California, in a ceremony I was invited to participate in, co-leading with two women who identify as priestesses of the Divine Feminine. This ceremony was organized as a time of blessing and sacred initiation for my sister, who had recently been diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer before she began aggressive chemotherapy.
1. The ceremony was unlike any ritualistic space I had ever been a part of, drawing on a variety of indigenous practices. Those who were gathered had been intentionally chosen as the women Manyd wanted to hold sacred space with her in this moment. As each woman in attendance entered, we were smudged with burning sage. In the yurt, we were given kava to drink which dulled our senses and was meant to help us connect with the sacred. One of the priestesses beat a drum and invited us to chant with her as we called upon the Sacred Mother's presence. And then we were invited into embodying the myth of Inanna, an old pre-Christian story about a goddess who descends into the underworld for the sister she loves. As she descends she passes several thresholds, and at each one, a guard requires her to remove a garment. By the time she has passed through all the layers of the underworld, she has been completely disrobed. As this intimate group of women listened to the story, we also embodied it, allowing my sister, like the goddess to disrobe and descend in her own way. By the end, she lay on an alter of flowers, and the women around her brought floral tributes to adorn her; she who was symbolically enacting her own process of being stripped away. They bowed before her and prayed. In that moment in the ceremony, I was asked to lead a song. I was asked to lead this room filled with women I didn't know who came from traditions different than my own. I chose a song I had written, one which I have led here many times, and I invited the women to sing it with me, knowing that the words spoke of a sacred presence that all of us, including my sister could reach out for and pray with. "I believe you when you say you're here with me" we sang with tears streaming down our faces. As each of us sang those words, accompanying and serenading my sister, I had never felt them to be more true.
- I. This orientation of "holy envy", may mean that we find ourselves in the **company of those who may surprise us**, whether that brings us to a yurt in Southern California, or it means we are involved in interfaith campaigns for justice and human rights in Gaza or in bipartisan campaigns for democracy and election integrity. Even as I feel the existential dread around this coming election season, I also see glimmers of encouragement, as courageous voices of conscious within conservative spaces do everything they can to speak out and tell the truth of the danger Donald Trump poses to their party and democracy as a whole - voices like former Congresswoman Liz Cheney, as well as legal voices like Judge Michael Luttig - conservative legal voices who have been advancing the argument that Trump should be disqualified from appearing on the ballot because of his participation in an insurrection. While I may disagree with these people on policy on any number of issues, I can stand in solidarity with their

commitment to preserve our democracy and can honor their willingness to take those steps even when they cost them everything they have politically. I can believe that somehow, though we come from different spaces and have many different beliefs, the fact that we are aligned on how we understand what was revealed on Epiphany 2021 might just be a sign that some truth that is greater than political allegiance might just be at work in our midst, and I want to have the courage to honor that and follow it.

J. As we look to the year ahead I want to end reading one more excerpt from Barbara Brown Taylor's book. I invite us all to receive it as a kind of blessing and encouragement in this call to peacemaking and holy envy this year.

1. *This is how far my holy envy has brought me: from fearing that Jesus will be mad at me for smelling other people's roses to trusting that Jesus is the Way that embraces all ways. Because there is only one of me, I can only walk one way at a time, but that does not prevent me from believing that other people might be walking their ways with equal devotion and good will. No one owns God. God alone knows what is good. For reasons that will never be entirely clear, God has a soft spot for religious strangers, both as agents of divine blessing and recipients of divine grace—to the point that God sometimes chooses one of them over people who believe they should by all rights come first. This is a great mystery, but it does nothing to obscure the great commandment. In every circumstance, regardless of the outcome, the main thing Jesus has asked me to do is to love God and my neighbor as religiously as I love myself. The minute I have that handled, I will ask for my next assignment. For now, my hands are full.*

2. May we all find our hands full with this kind of work this year. Amen.

Questions for reflection and discussion:

1. How has your journey of faith been impacted by the presence of “religious strangers”? What gifts have you received from those outside your faith? What gifts have you been able to give?
2. What does “holy envy” mean to you?
3. How do you think these themes connect with making peace in 2024?
- 4.