

Finding Another Road

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MATTHEW 2:1-12

Sunday, January 4, 2026

“Finding Another Road” | Matthew 2:1-12 | Pastor Charlie Berthoud

In the gospel according to Matthew, the first word spoken by a human is “Where?”

“Where is the child?” ask the magi.

The gospel begins with searching.

For good reason, we often ponder “the journey of faith.” And we ask ourselves “where are we going?”

Today’s gospel lesson tells us of the wise men, or magi, who went on a long journey of faith seeking the newborn king, and they had to change their direction, because they were afraid of the earthly king, who was afraid of this new king. Listen for God’s word.

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi from the east came to Jerusalem, ² asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star in the east and have come to pay him homage.” ³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him, ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶ ‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah,
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.’

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the magi and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸ Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” ⁹ When they had heard the king, they set out, and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen in the east, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹ On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.



The star guided the magi to Jesus, the one who was called a king.

This is why we provide “star words” on this Sunday. Each star has word that is meant to guide or comfort or perhaps challenge you in the year on your journey of faith, just as the star guided the magi to Jesus.

So today is a good day to think about how words guide us. I want to share three other words which are important for us in our world today.

Empire— Merrian Webster dictionary defines empire as territory and people under control. Jesus was born in the shadow of empire. The reading today makes it clear from the start: In the time of King Herod..... A big part of the gospel story is how Jesus the king is a threat to Herod and to all the kings and empires of this world. As I mentioned on Christmas Eve and last Sunday, Jesus was born in the shadow of empire, and as we’ve seen in history, emperors don’t like rivals.

Epiphany—which might be one of our star words, Merrian Webster dictionary defines Epiphany not only as the festival on January 6 remembering the Magi, but also as:

- an illuminating discovery, realization, or disclosure
- an intuitive grasp of reality through something usually simple and striking

As people on the journey of faith, it’s good to have our eyes and lives open for new discoveries and new ways of perceiving reality.



Slop—Merriam Webster made slop the word of the year for 2025, with the definition that slop is “digital content of low quality that is produced usually in quantity by means of artificial intelligence.”

Their press release also included this:

The flood of slop in 2025 included absurd videos, off-kilter advertising images, cheesy propaganda, fake news that looks pretty real, junky AI-written books, “workslop” reports that waste coworkers’ time... and lots of talking cats. People found it annoying, and people ate it up. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/wordplay/word-of-the-year>

We live in a world

- where empires and emperors remain strong,
- where we are surrounded by slop, by all sorts of noise and nonsense, by distractions and divisions,
- and where we long for epiphanies of goodness and truth and wisdom.

In that world, we are inviting you to pick up a star word **and** to read the gospel according to Matthew this month—with the hope that we could be courageous and wise in relation to today’s empires, that we could avoid the slop of nonsense, and that we could be open to epiphanies of God’s love and God’s call.

Reading a gospel seems like a reasonable expectation for those of us who call ourselves Christians. It takes two to three hours to read Matthew in one sitting. Over the course of a month, that 4-6 minutes a day.

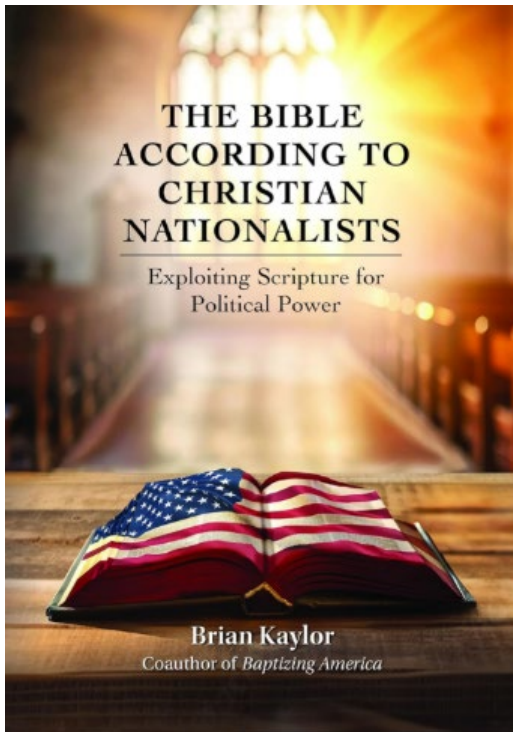
Each gospel has a different perspective on Jesus, and Matthew emphasizes Jesus as teacher. There are five collections of Jesus’ teaching in Matthew

The Sermon on the Mount	Matthew 5-7
Missionary Instructions	Matthew 10
Parables of the Kingdom	Matthew 13
Living in Community	Matthew 18
The End Time	Matthew 24-25

Each of the sections ends with something like: “when Jesus finished saying these things.”

The five sections seem to echo the five books of the Torah, the first five books of the Bible. And Jesus is the new Moses, the one to lead the people out of slavery and oppression, toward the promised land.

THEME So our hope in reading Matthew is, among other things, for guidance on our journey of faith, for finding the way, and for finding another road if necessary.



Here at Covenant, we focus on LEARNING and LIVING God's love. Reading a gospel will help.

Reading the Bible is good, but we have to smart and humble and persistent with our Bible reading.

In two weeks, we're having a discussion on a book about Christian Nationalism, and in prepping for that, I just started reading *The Bible According to Christian Nationalism: Exploiting Scripture for Political Power*, by Brian Kaylor.

It's a fascinating and disturbing account of how the Bible has used performatively and been manipulated for partisan purposes.

The second chapter, titled "The Bible as Prop," critiques how politicians and religious people sometimes use the Bible for show, not substance. The author mentions

politicians who like to wave the Bible around in public but never mention anything about the content. The author also mentions politicians promoting and profiting from selling the God Bless the USA Bible, which was ironically made in China.

And then the author shares several bizarre and disturbing examples of using the Bible as a prop, like when a prominent pastor who in his effort to demonize the Barbie movie for being too "woke" taped a Bible to a baseball bat and smashed a Barbie doll house during his sermon. Using the Bible as a prop is easier than actually reading it and listening for God to speak to us through it.

You know what else is using the Bible as a prop? It's when your church invites everyone to read the gospel according to Matthew over the course of month, and you think it's a good idea, but you don't do it.

In *The Bible According to Christian Nationalists*, the author writes, "We are not equipped to challenge the misuse of the Bible if we don't even open it." (p. 10)

He cites Pew Research that says 60% of mainline Protestants seldom or never read the Bible. And he continues: "Failing to challenge the twisting of the Bible to justify and evangelize for Christian Nationalism has empowered bad faith uses of the text." (p. 11)

This is one of many good reasons to make the commitment to read Matthew. Today is the first of five sermons on Matthew. I know many of you have started and have read chapters 1 to 4 over the first four days of the month.

If you haven't started yet, it's not too late, and there is an easy access point for to begin tomorrow. Chapters 1-4 are important, but they are also introductory. You can start tomorrow with chapter 5.

Chapter 5 is the beginning of the first of one of those five teaching sections of Matthew. Chapters 5 to 7 are collectively known as "The Sermon on the Mount."

It begins with Jesus offering blessings

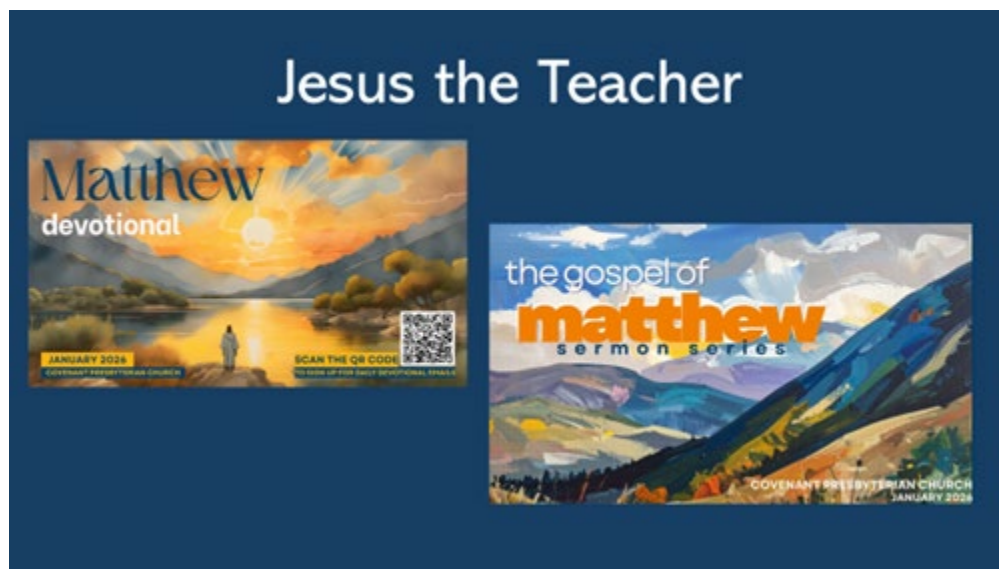
- Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
- Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

It continues with Jesus encouraging people to not just follow the letter of the law, but to go deeper, to be open to seeing things in new ways.

Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...."

And then Jesus teaches what is known as the golden rule: "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you, for this is the Law and the Prophets."

These teachings and many others in the Sermon on the Mount give us guidance, comfort, challenge, and hope from **Jesus the teacher**.



This spring marks the 50th anniversary of my sixth-grade "graduation," at Bugbee Elementary School in West Hartford, CT. On our social media page, we've been sharing memories and talking about our favorite teachers.

A good teacher can have a huge impact on our lives.

I realized that my two favorites were the Spanish teacher and the librarian. It's probably not a coincidence that I've had a lifelong passion for Latin America and for books. So thank you, Miss Sousa and Mrs. Horton.

A good teacher inspires us and opens us up to the world. A good teacher helps us get back on track when we're lost. A good teacher helps us see familiar things in a new way. A good teacher isn't afraid to challenge us and tell us we can do better. A good teacher helps us find the path of life, which sometimes means taking a different road.

Thanks be to God for Jesus the teacher. Amen.