First reading
from The Underground Church: Reclaiming the Subversive Way of Jesus
by Robin Meyers

Every Sunday morning, countless people wake up with both a desire to go to church and a gnawing sense that it won’t be worth it. They know that they “ought” to go, but if they do so, it will be mostly out of habit or guilt rooted in childhood. Few wake with a sense of real longing or anticipation for what might happen in the sanctuary. Many have accepted boredom as the cross one must bear for church attendance. They expect little more from worship than social respectability often wrapped in the dull air of familiarity. The last thing anyone thinks about church is that it might be dangerous.

Second reading
Matthew 2:1-12  New Revised Standard Version

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

‘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.’”
Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 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.” When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 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. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

2018 was a year of epiphanies. It was about a year ago when the search team announced that they were presenting a pastoral candidate for this church, and on the third Sunday of January we formalized this new venture. It was as though a light went on for Tripp and me. It was a moment of clarity that shifted everything we thought we knew about our identity and purpose. Then there was an epiphany or two (or ten) around the work of John Mabry, introduced to this congregation by our interim minister, Irene Laudeman. His understanding of the stark contrasts between generations led us to some new conclusions about the future of this place, and helped us to understand that we aren’t just playing church up here on the hill. We have a window of opportunity to do something vitally important, and it will not be open forever. When we began to realize this, it was like a light went on.

Epiphanies need not be unusual things. These are the moments that inspire us to say, “Wow, I never saw it that way before,” and they are ready and waiting to manifest any time we open the door. The fun thing about epiphanies is that we can open that door any day we want, as many times as we want. We live in a sea of epiphanies, if we choose to see them. Think light switch: as long as you have an electrical connection, a decent light bulb, and a current account with PG&E, you can flip it on as many times as you wish.

The traditional Christian calendar designates this day as Epiphany (with a capital “E”), marking the fact that we have moved past the twelve days of Christmas, or the time it took (traditionally speaking) the Magi to make their way to the baby Jesus with their extravagant gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The whole story is a little odd. It is only found in the portrait called Matthew. It never says there were three wise men—just three different gifts. And it looks like their journey took much longer than twelve days, since the Gospel says that Jesus was a “young child,” which in the original Greek would signify a toddler. (Since I already ruined the Christmas story for you, it only stands to reason that I would burst your Epiphany bubble as well.)

Once again, the gospels have nothing to do with the technicalities of history. We’re painting another portrait here, one of an unusual birth, one that King Herod, “the puppet of Rome,” found to be dangerous. And why was it dangerous? Because he fancied himself “King of the
Jews.” And when these strange eastern mystics showed up at the palace gates inquiring about a toddler who was to be “King of the Jews,” it stands to reason—as the story goes—that Herod might say, “I’d really like it if you’d let me know where you find him.”

This is the beginning of the Jesus story, the story of the unusual child who would somehow—we’re not sure exactly how—show up about thirty years later as a subversive rabbi, gathering people on the hills of the countryside to teach something so counter-cultural that it infuriated not only Herod and the Romans, but also Jews and the religious elite. And there is nothing to indicate that Jesus of Nazareth ever intended to start a new major world religion. He just wanted to reform the religion he already had. He was born, lived, and died a Jew.

The author of our first reading is Robin Meyers, a theologian, a peace activist, and author of seven books on progressive Christianity. He is also the long-time pastor of the Mayflower Congregational United Church of Christ in Oklahoma City. In 2010, he published a book called The Underground Church: Reclaiming the Subversive Way of Jesus. It’s been four or five years since I even picked it up. It caught my eye the other day, and I started reading it again, probably for the third time. I had forgotten what a formative book this has been for me.

I chose this reading for today, not because I think anyone here is necessarily bored, nor because I think anyone comes here because they think they necessarily “ought” to. It’s not really our style at CCC to do guilt, or institutional duty, so to speak. I chose the reading because of its last sentence, “The last thing anyone thinks about church is that it might be dangerous,” which begs the questions “What on earth could be dangerous about church? Dangerous in what way? Dangerous to whom?”

The story of the Magi is certainly filled with danger. This news at the palace gate certainly felt dangerous to Herod, who in a fit of narcissism and paranoia ordered the slaughter of the innocents in an attempt to extinguish any threat to his own power. And the story has some foreshadowing of the danger imposed upon this toddler who, once he became an adult, was known for inciting crowds, speaking truth to power, and overturning the tables of the money changers in the temple.

The epiphany or the light switch I’d like us to consider flipping on this morning is that what we do here on the top of Rock Hill Drive might be considered dangerous, and what we do when we get to the bottom of the hill might even be more so. I do not know a single congregation of any persuasion that isn’t asking the question, “How can we bring more younger people into our church?” I’d like to suggest this morning that this is the wrong question to ask. The question should be “What are we collectively doing in this world that matters to younger people?” I don’t think there is a soul under the age of 50 who cares to go to church for the sake of going to church. And if the news out of this new Congress is any indication, we are turning a corner, where slow incremental change is going to get turned on its ear by a new generation that says, “If we don’t do something quickly, nothing is going to matter.” It sounds something like that window of opportunity that Irene used to talk about. If we want this church to be more than just a legacy of what once was, we’re
going to have to make ourselves and the world around us just a bit more uncomfortable. We’re going to have to take some radical steps into the unknown and get a little dangerous. And here’s a radical statement for you: *We can do all of this by following Jesus.* Not the fancy Jesus created by two millennia of ecclesiastical patriarchy, but the Jesus we can know about, Jesus of Nazareth, whose teachings—at least the ones that have been handed down and written for us—will cause us to engage with the world in dangerous ways, ways that will make a real difference, ways that will alter the course of history.

There is a movement within progressive Christianity which I call the New Reformation, and whether we choose to be or not, we’re in it. It is happening, regardless of the vision we have for this place. This is not a time for the church to dress for success. It’s a time for it to get in the trenches and dig our way to a new day. On the twelfth day of Christmas, my true love gave to me … a meditation cushion, a Bible, and a pick axe.

Amen.