

# ASBURY CIRCUIT RIDER

Volume 6

Issue 4

JANUARY 4, 2026

## Renewal (After the upload)



There is a subtle, but growing unease in our midst, brought into the open by artificial intelligence. Some recent fuel came from an AI-generated song that quickly rose to the top of the charts. The reaction was immediate. People were fascinated. But also unsettled. Not because we're suddenly becoming experts in

copyright law, but because it feels like something much deeper is at stake.

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## Strangers (Epiphany)



Recently, in Dedham, Massachusetts, a Catholic parish put up a Christmas Nativity display that looked very different from what most of us expect. Instead of figures of the infant Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, the manger was empty. In the spot where the Holy Family would normally stand, a large sign read: "ICE was here."

The parish's pastor said the display was meant to reflect the fears and experiences of immigrant families in the community and to spark conversation about how people in need are treated. And it accomplished its goal.

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## Renewal (After the upload) *cont. from pg 1*

The questions are straightforward, beginning with “Who wrote this? Whose voice is this?” Many of us are asking whether this song is really art or an imitation of someone else’s art?” If imitation, how is this different than an artist doing a “cover” of another artist’s song? Still others say, “If it moves us, does it matter how it was made?”

These are not technical questions. They are human ones.

They belong to a much larger conversation that has been unfolding for years, long before AI entered the picture. Famous artists have become wealthy through the legal ownership of their work. Others have found themselves entangled in costly legal battles over melodies, rhythms, and influences that feel impossibly difficult to separate. Courts are asked to draw sharp boundaries around something that was never meant to be airtight.

This isn’t about blaming artists or dismissing the value of creative labor. Artists deserve to live from their work. Creation has worth. But the intensity of these conflicts reveals something more profound than ownership. It reveals a fear that if what sustains us can be taken away, we will lose not just income but also identity.

I feel that tension personally. I’ve written for decades, long before AI tools became a part of my process. Like most writers, I’ve relied on help. Over the years, I’ve used spell-checkers, editors, grammar tools, and the like. But I also use voices that have shaped my own. So now the question feels sharper. Not just how we write, but who gets to claim what is written.

If I didn’t create this entirely on my own, is it still mine? If I can’t keep it, does it still matter?

Further underneath the debates about technology, ownership, and influence is a more profound anxiety. An anxiety that reaches far beyond artists alone, known as the fear of scarcity. The fear that there isn’t enough to go around. The fear that if we don’t hold tightly, someone else will end up with what we need to survive.

And that fear has consequences. We see wealth and influence concentrating in fewer and fewer hands. We see systems built to protect value slowly suffocating the life they were meant to preserve. We see people fighting over what once flowed freely among us.

A more common word for scarcity keeps surfacing in our public conversation right now: affordability. It shows up in headlines, campaigns, and kitchen-table conversations alike. And regardless of who we listen to or trust, many of us feel the same pressure—the sense that ordinary life is becoming harder to sustain.

Scarcity, when shaped by fear, is not a natural condition but a human creation. It emerges when greed concentrates more and more into fewer and fewer hands, leaving the rest grasping for what remains. That is why an affordability crisis born of greed cannot be healed by solutions that rely on more greed—more control, more hoarding, more competition for air.

Scarcity teaches us to hold our breath. But Scripture insists that life is not restored by clenching harder; it is renewed when we learn, again, how to receive and how to share.

Which is why this conversation ultimately isn’t about AI at all. It’s about breath. We’re really talking about breath, because breath is the one thing we cannot live without—and the one thing we were never meant to own.

IN OUR PRAYERS

Virginia Bigger	Richard Oram
Sylvia Pittman	Jonathon Misner
Miriam Watson	Brian DuFour
Pastor Tommy	



FRIENDS AND LOVED ONES WHO ARE HOMEBOUND OR IN NURSING CARE

Dean Lamoreaux	Norma Buzzard
Nancy Elston	

**COMING UP THIS WEEK:**

**JANUARY 5 - 11**

Jan 5	Mon		
Jan 6	Tue	9:00am-until gone	Produce will be available each week, along with canned goods, until further notice
Jan 7	Wed	11am-1pm	Angel Closet at South Flint Soup Kitchen
Jan 8	Thu	1:00pm	United Women in Faith
Jan 9	Fri		
Jan 10	Sat		
Jan 11	Sun	10:30am	New Beginnings Contemporary Worship

(We are live on [Facebook](#) and our newly launched [YouTube channel](#). You can find these links along with more information about us on our website at ([FlintAsbury.org](#).)



TO ALL OF OUR ASBURY FAMILY!!

THANK YOU TO ASBURY UMC, ASBURY CDC,  
UNITED WOMEN IN FAITH AND EVERYONE ELSE  
THAT TOOK THE TIME TO SENT ME GIFTS AND  
CARDS THIS HOLIDAY!!!

WE HAD A VERY SUCCESSFUL THANKSGIVING TURKEY  
FOOD BOX GIVEAWAY, 40 FAMILIES! AND THIS  
CHRISTMAS WE WERE ABLE TO HELP OUT 30 MORE  
FAMILIES WITH CHRISTMAS HAM FOOD BOXES.  
WE WERE ALSO ABLE TO HAND OUT FOOD BOXES  
TO OUR SOUTH FLINT SOUP KITCHEN FAMILIES  
IN NEED!

I ALSO WANT TO SEND OUT A BIG THANK YOU TO  
KEVIN CROOM AND HIS STAFF FOR A WONDERFUL  
CHRISTMAS DINNER HE COOKED FOR US LAST WEEK.  
NO ONE LEFT HUNGRY... IT WAS ALL SO YUMMY!!

I WANT TO WISH ALL OF OUR ASBURY FAMILY A  
WONDERFUL, SAFE AND HEALTHY 2026 NEW YEAR!!

MERRY CHRISTMAS ... FELIZ NAVIDAD!!

HAPPY NEW YEAR ... FELIZ ANO NUEVO!!

CONNIE

## Upcoming Worship Series "Epiphany"



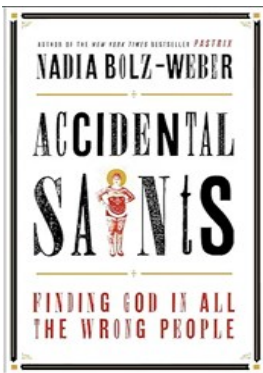
As we begin a new year, we live in a world marked by rapid change, deep division, and widespread exhaustion. Many of us sense that something essential is being revealed—but we are not always sure what to do with what we see. This *Epiphany* series asks a simple but demanding question: What do we need to see more clearly now?

Take a close look at the image above. What do you see? Why was this image chosen for a series on epiphanies?

A figure stands alone in ruins—crumbling walls, peeling paint, debris scattered across the floor. The space feels abandoned, forgotten, and left to chaos and decay. But look closer. The figure isn't looking at the destruction around them. They're looking through it, toward an archway that frames brilliant light streaming in from beyond.

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## Book Club News



For our Epiphany series, we'll be reading Nadia Bolz-Weber's *Accidental Saints: Finding God in All the Wrong People* as our companion book. But here's

the twist: we're not reading it cover to cover. We're reading it thematical-

ly—jumping around to match each week's sermon focus.

Before you panic, hear us out.

If you haven't met Nadia Bolz-Weber yet, prepare yourself. She's a heavily tattooed, foul-mouthed Lutheran pastor who founded House for All Sinners and Saints in Denver—a church for people who don't fit anywhere else. She's exactly the kind of person religious folks might dismiss, which is precisely why her voice matters.

*Accidental Saints* tells 19 stories of how Bolz-Weber discovered that the people who drove her crazy, the ones she wanted nothing to do with, kept turning out to be her teachers. God, it seems, has a sense of humor about who gets to deliver divine truth.

The book is funny, honest, and deeply faithful. Bolz-Weber writes about depression, addiction, difficult people, and the messy reality of trying to follow Jesus without any of the usual religious polish. She refuses to sanitize her stories or offer easy answers. Instead, she tells the truth about what it actually looks like when broken people encounter a God who loves them anyway.

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## Asbury Staff

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Kevin Croom      Executive Director/CDC  
Connie Portillo      Office Secretary  
Kim Sims      Finance Director  
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South Flint Soup Kitchen

## Leadership in Worship & Service



Tony & Mirium	Welcome Team
Cyndi	Worship Leader
Anthony & Jim	Ushers
Jonathon & Terrance	Production Team
Yasheah & Mirium	Nursery
Christine	Cafe



*Upcoming Worship Series — “Epiphany”*

This is a threshold moment. Not the comfortable kind where you stand safely on one side deciding whether to cross. This is the kind where you've already stepped through—where the doorway behind you has closed, and the only way forward is toward that light ahead, even if you can't yet see exactly where it leads.

That's where we find ourselves as we begin 2026.

Over seven weeks, we will explore epiphanies that matter for this moment—epiphanies about limits, truth, neighbors, suffering, and responsibility. These are not abstract ideas. They are ways of seeing that shape how we live together, how we love, and how we act with integrity in the world God so loves.

In our tradition, the season of Epiphany begins with the Magi—outsiders to Israel's faith, culture, and story. They were immigrants. Strangers who traveled far to encounter Jesus. While there, a dream warned them about King Herod's true intentions, and they had to find another way home. They couldn't return the way they came.

Having seen what they'd seen, the old road was closed. They'd crossed a threshold. There was no going back.

Epiphany reminds us that God's self-disclosure is rarely confined to familiar places or familiar people. And while thresholds are intended as two-way, for entering and exiting, the reality is that once we cross, we don't return the same.

That's the invitation of this series: to name what we've seen, to stand honestly in the ruins of what's broken, and to keep our eyes fixed on the light ahead rather than exhausting ourselves trying to force our way back through doors that have closed behind us.

Epiphany is not about having all the answers. It is about learning to see—and then deciding how we will live in response.

## Upcoming Worship Series — “Epiphany”

Here is the outline of our series:

<u>Episode</u>	<u>Sundays</u>	<u>Title</u>	<u>Scripture</u>
One	Jan 4	Strangers	Matthew 2:1-12
Two	Jan 11	Limits	Mark 6:30-32
Three	Jan 18	Truth	John 8:31-32
Four	Jan 25	Neighbors	Luke 10:25-37
Five	Feb 1	Suffering	Matthew 2:16-18
Six	Feb 8	Responsibility	James 2:14-17;
Seven	Feb 15	Transformation	Matthew 2:12

Each week we'll explore these epiphanies alongside Nadia Bolz-Weber's book *Accidental Saints* (see our Book Club article for details). Her raw, honest stories about encountering God in unexpected places will deepen our journey through this season.

Look again at that figure in the ruins, standing at the threshold, facing the light. That's us. That's where this series begins.

Join us starting January 4 as we ask together: What do we need to see more clearly now? And having seen it, how will we live?

We can't go back to 2025. And who would want to given the chaos that unfolded across our nation. Likewise, we can't unsee what we've already witnessed. The only question is: will we keep moving toward the light, or exhaust ourselves trying to force our way back through a door that's already closed? This Epiphany, we choose the light. We choose to see clearly. And we choose to let that clarity change how we live.

The threshold is behind us. The journey begins January 4.

Please join us each Sunday at 10:30 a.m. We share our weekly episodes on [Facebook](#) and our [YouTube channel](#), and go live at 10:30 a.m. You can find these links and more information about us, or join our live broadcast on our [website](#), [FlintAsburyChurch.org](http://FlintAsburyChurch.org).

Pastor Tommy


Nadia Bolz-Weber. *Accidental Saints: Finding God in All the Wrong People*. NY: Convergent Books, 2015. (ISBN 978-1-60142-755-7).

“Feed Flint”





# “Feed Flint”



A meal goes a long way for a senior living alone, a family struggling to make ends meet, or a child fearful of empty shelves at home. But for the residents of Flint who carry the effects of lead-tainted water, nutrition is critical. Feed Flint provides locally grown, chemical-free, fresh produce to residents living in and around Flint. And we're hoping that you can help us provide 10,000 meals this summer.

Feed Flint includes takeout meals, produce boxes with recipes, and home deliveries as part of our work to guide and support families in moving to sustainable abundance. The reality is that Michigan's food insecurity levels got worse during the COVID-19 pandemic, and this summer's recovery is leaving behind those at the most risk of having to miss meals.

## **Flint families continue to struggle with the ongoing effects of the water crisis.**

We're bringing together the resources of the Asbury Community Development Corporation. This includes Asbury Farms, the South Flint Soup Kitchen, the Asbury Community Help Center, multiple food pantries, and our Sizzling Culture Mobile Food Trailer. Our plan is to care for our neighbors when they need it most. We accept all people as they are, and our doors are always open to anyone.

Asbury Farms provides locally grown produce used to create fabulous and nutritious meals. Our seed-to-table approach is community-based. This not only helps families make it through emergencies and crises. We help move families towards sustainable abundance.

Our Sizzling Culture program provides jobs and new skills to our city's youth. This includes year-round employment. Our staff and most of our volunteers come from the neighborhoods we support. We call this sustainable abundance because families move from need-based on scarcity to enough based on community-generated abundance.

Our work is also about food and justice. Our vision is a revitalized community where every resident can use their talents and passions for the common good, where children grow into active citizens. And all residents can enjoy safety, good health, and a culture that fosters life-long learning and satisfying lives. This summer, help us address food insecurity and strengthen Flint's budding local food system by supporting the Feed Flint campaign. Thank you for taking the time to see what we're doing and considering how you can help.

Donate to our Feed Flint Campaign by visiting:  
[flintasbury.org/feed-flint-donate](https://flintasbury.org/feed-flint-donate)

**LIFE GROUP QUESTIONS & MORE:**



*The star went ahead of them until it stopped over the house where the child was. They went inside, and when they saw the child with His mother Mary, they knelt down and worshiped Him.*

Matthew 2:1–12

**NOTES FROM WORSHIP**

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**QUESTIONS FOR LIFE GROUPS:**

1. Read Matthew 2:1–12 and the article in this week’s Circuit Rider titled Strangers. This week, let’s work towards recovering the ability to see hope where we have trained ourselves not to look. Reflect on what assumptions we carry about strangers, immigrants, and “people not like us.”
2. How might we consider that our discomfort may not be a warning, but an invitation?
3. How can your group members help you be more receptive to hearing and understanding the Word of God this week? Pray for one another to be blessed by the Holy Spirit with greater courage.







## Show Your Support For Your Local Farm

We need your help to purchase fencing to keep our furry friends from eating up all our crops and not sharing with us.

### How You Can Donate

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- Text "FARMCDC"
- to 53-555
- Scan QR Code

Donate Now



More Information :



(810) 235-0016



funding@flintasbury.org

### **Why Read Thematically?**

Each Sunday, we'll explore a different epiphany—limits, truth, neighbors, suffering, responsibility. We want the book to deepen what you're hearing in worship, not just run parallel to it. So we're assigning chapters that connect directly with each week's theme.

For example, when we talk about truth-telling on MLK weekend (Week 3), you'll have just read Bolz-Weber's raw account of preaching at a Sandy Hook funeral and her critique of mission-trip savior complexes. When we talk about embodied action (Week 6), you'll have just read her foot-washing stories. The connection matters.

At about 200 pages total with 19 chapters, we're planning to read 2-3 chapters per week (roughly 25-30 pages). Bolz-Weber's writing is conversational and moves quickly—you won't need a theology degree or three hours of uninterrupted time.

Here's a taste of what you're in for. Bolz-Weber writes: "God's grace is not defined as God being forgiving to us even though we sin. Grace is when God is a source of wholeness, which makes up for my failings. My failings hurt me and others and even the planet, and God's grace to me is that my brokenness is not the final word."

If you're tired of pretending everything is fine, if you're weary of religious performance, if you've ever wondered whether God shows up in the mess—this book is for you.

Let's read together and see what God wants to show us.

If you choose to follow along, here is our plan:

<u>Sunday's</u>	<u>Chapters</u>	<u>Themes</u>
Jan 4	Intro, Chs 1-2	Seeing what's missing
Jan 11	Chs 3, 4, & 9	We're not so good
Jan 18	Chs 5, 8, & 11	The truth sets us free
Jan 25	Chs 6, 10, & 12	Loving real people
Feb 1	Chs 7, 14, & 17	Sitting in pain
Feb 8	Chs 13, 15, & 16	Faith in action
Feb 15	Chs 18, 19 & Concl	Home by another road

Yes, we're skipping around. Yes, you'll get all 19 chapters by the end. No, the world won't end if you read them out of order.

#### **But What If I'm a Sequential Reader?**

Look, we get it. Some of you break out in hives, figuratively, at the thought of reading Chapter 9 before Chapter 5. Your inner librarian is screaming. You color-code your calendar and alphabetize your spices.

So, here's your permission slip: Read the book however you want.

If reading straight through from page 1 brings you joy and keeps you engaged, do that. You'll still benefit from the series, and honestly, the chapters work both ways—they tell a coherent story sequentially, AND they stand alone thematically. Bolz-Weber structures each chapter around a different saint or liturgical moment, so jumping around doesn't break anything essential.

But if you're willing to try something different, give the thematic approach a shot. You might discover that reading Chapter 8 (Sandy Hook) right before hearing a sermon about truth-telling on MLK weekend creates connections you wouldn't have noticed reading it in order. Sometimes disruption leads to epiphany. Which is, after all, what this whole series is about.

We'll have a few new books available for purchase at \$7 each. Additional copies of the paperback edition are available through Amazon for under \$11, and used copies in good condition are even less. This book may also be available at the local library.

Our Book Club does not meet as a group. However, our weekly messages reference that week's chapters. You can anticipate spoiler alerts unless you keep up with the pace. You can purchase your own copy or visit your local library.

You can contact our office with questions by phone or simply type your question or enter a prayer request on our website's homepage — [FlintAsburyChurch.org](http://FlintAsburyChurch.org).

Pastor Tommy

Nadia Bolz-Weber. *Accidental Saints: Finding God in All the Wrong People*. NY: Convergent Books, 2015. (ISBN 978-1-60142-755-7).



Cash or checks can be sent to/dropped off at South Flint Soup Kitchen, 3410 Fenton Road, Flint, MI 48507. Please make checks out to South Flint Soup Kitchen!

Online at [www.mightycause.com/feedflint](http://www.mightycause.com/feedflint)

Donations can be dropped off Monday-Friday 11am-12Noon. Calling ahead is not necessary, but our needs change frequently, so calling ahead of time is a good idea!

Give time! We need volunteers!!! Volunteers arrive at 9:30am and are done by 12:30pm. Tasks include handing out lunches, assisting in the Angel Closet, light cleaning, putting together items to pass out to clients, and more.

Refer people!!

Questions??? Call 810-239-3427  
or email [southflintsoupkitchen@gmail.com](mailto:southflintsoupkitchen@gmail.com)

There are two processes involved in breathing. When we inhale, we receive what we did not create. And when we exhale, we release what we cannot keep.

Life depends on both. And scripture speaks about life in the language of breath, rather than ownership.

In Genesis, humanity does not begin with invention or achievement. The human is formed from dust, which most of us see as lifeless matter. That is, until God breathes into it. God breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the first human became a living being.

Breath is life. Life is not seized. It is received. And it must be received again and again.

We find this idea again in Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones. These bones belong to a people with history, memory, and identity. They can be assembled. They can be organized. But they cannot make themselves live.

*Can these bones  
come back to life?*

Ezekiel 37: 1-14

God asks Ezekiel, "Can these bones live?" And the answer comes not through better systems or stronger claims, but

through breath. Breath restores life without reassigning ownership. The bones do not own the breath. Instead, they are animated by it.

And after the resurrection, when the disciples are hiding behind locked doors—afraid of loss, afraid of the future—Jesus does something unmistakably familiar. He breathes on them. "Receive the Holy Spirit," He says.

Not new rules. Not control. Not protection of assets. Breath.

Scripture is remarkably consistent here: life is sustained by gift, not possession. Meaning flows from relationship, not accumulation. And whenever God's people forget this—whenever fear leads to hoarding, domination, or exclusion—life begins to dry up.

Laws can define rights, but laws cannot heal fear. Laws can assign ownership, but they cannot teach us how to trust. Laws can protect boundaries, but they cannot breathe life.

Which is why the struggles we are witnessing now—over art, technology, wealth and influence—feel so costly. We are trying to own what was never meant to be possessed. We are holding our breath, afraid there won't be enough air for everyone.

Scripture names this not as innovation, but as a familiar human problem. But then scripture offers a different way.

Ezekiel's vision does not end with animated bones standing alone in the valley. When God breathes, life comes, and the bones rise together, because renewal in scripture is never a private matter. Life can never be hoarded. Life is never for the few at the expense of the many.

The breath of God creates a people, and this is where the gospel speaks directly to our moment.

In a world shaped by scarcity—where fewer have more and more, and many are left grasping for what remains—the gospel announces abundance. Not abundance as accumulation, but abundance as shared life.

Jesus does not gather breath and store it. He gives it away. Jesus feeds crowds instead of protecting the supply. He releases forgiveness instead of guarding power. Jesus pours out his life rather than securing it.

Jenna Russell, writing for the *New York Times*, noted that Facebook comments were mixed, with several thanking the church for “speaking truth to power.” While another person posted that “the devil has infiltrated the church.” Elizabeth Doris-Gustin, 67, a longtime neighbor of the parish, said this: “You might not agree with everything, but it makes you think. I wish a few more churches would be this bold.”

Nativity scenes appeared across the country this year without the Holy Family. They still have a stable. There are animals. The structure looks familiar. But Mary and Joseph—and sometimes the child—are missing. Often, no explanation is offered. The scene is simply incomplete.

That image lingers, because it feels familiar.

There is a growing sense that something essential has been removed—not destroyed, just displaced and not argued away, just quietly set aside. Over the past year in particular, many have felt it: a loss of hope we once assumed would always be there.

Many of us hope that our country will mirror our values, shaped by the teachings of Christ. This is different than making Christianity a national religion, since our hopes mirror those of most of the world’s

religions. It is the hope that strangers can be welcomed without fear, that truth can matter more than power, that the vulnerable are worth protecting, and that the future can be more just than the present.

Instead, something has shifted: fear has been normalized, suspicion has been rewarded, cruelty has been excused as realism, and outsiders have become convenient symbols for everything we’re anxious about. What’s been lost is not confidence or comfort—it’s moral imagination. The ability to believe that we can be better than our worst instincts.

This is the hope many feel has slipped through our fingers—not because it was weak, but because it was treated as expendable.

Matthew begins his telling of the Christmas story with people who don’t belong. And that tension feels uncomfortably familiar. They’re not neighbors. Not insiders. Not people who already belong. Nor are they shepherds from nearby fields. Neither are they neighbors from Bethlehem. And they’re certainly not faithful insiders who know the songs and the scriptures by heart. No, they’re just strangers from somewhere else.

At least three individuals, “Matthew tells us—scholars from the East, likely Persian—make their way across borders and through uncertainty, guided by a

sign they cannot fully explain. They arrive in Jerusalem with a question that unsettles everyone who hears it: Where is the child who has been born King?

They came from different customs, different food, and likely had different assumptions about how the world works and how God speaks. They dressed differently. They likely spoke an ancient Persian dialect (Iran) and also Aramaic, the language of the Holy Family. Nevertheless, they somehow show up in Matthew’s gospel as the ones paying attention.

Their journey is long, uncertain, and risky. They cross borders. They travel through unfamiliar territory. They rely on hospitality that they cannot guarantee. And when they finally arrive in Jerusalem—the religious and political center—they don’t find welcome.

They are not looking for something new. They are looking for something true. They’re looking for hope.

So they do what makes sense. They go to the palace, where they find Herod. Herod listens, but not with curiosity. He asks questions, but not because he wants to learn. He smiles, but it doesn’t reach his eyes.

This king is threatened by hope that does not originate with him. The storyteller is foreshadowing, and we know enough of the story to feel the chill. When strangers carry hope, power often responds with fear. Not optimism. Not comfort. Power is threatened by the deeper hope that strangers matter, that truth can outweigh fear, that power can be held accountable, that the future doesn't have to mirror our worst instincts.

And this, too, feels familiar.

The Magi sense a similar loss. They have studied history. They know the stories. They have seen signs before. And something tells them that hope has surfaced again—fragile, vulnerable, and easily missed.

When people go searching today for the hope that feels lost, they often begin where the Magi did—with those in authority. With institutions. With leaders. With systems that promise security and order.

Surely someone there knows where hope is kept.

But again and again, seekers discover the same thing the Magi did: power is very good at naming hope—and very poor at trusting it.

Herod sends the strangers on their way with careful words and hidden intentions. He fakes interest, but what he wants is information. Hope, when it does not originate with power, becomes something to manage rather than receive.

And there is a quiet warning in the story Matthew tells: when fear governs us, we begin to treat outsiders not as witnesses, but as threats, not as bearers of insight, but as problems to be solved. This is where the loss of hope becomes visible. Because hope does not thrive where fear decides who belongs. Hope does not live comfortably in palaces. Hope is rarely protected by those who benefit most from the way things are.

So the Magi leave Jerusalem. They turn away from power. They keep following the light. Matthew also tells us that when the Magi leave Jerusalem, the star appears again. Not brighter. Not louder. Just present.

This is where the hope they were seeking has been hiding. The hope they find is not strength without weakness. It is not safety without cost. It is not dominance, control, or fear-driven protection. The hope they see is God choosing proximity over power.

*The star went ahead of them until it stopped over the house where the child was. They went inside, and when they saw the child with His mother Mary, they knelt down and worshipped Him.*

Matthew 2:1-12

The star leads them—not upward, but downward. Not toward strength, but toward vulnerability.

Toward a house. Toward a family without status. Toward people living close to the edge of survival. To a child born into economic precarity. To people who will soon become refugees themselves. This is not accidental. It is theological.

Matthew is preparing us for a revelation: the hope we fear we've lost has not disappeared. It has simply been living somewhere else.

What would it be like today for a small delegation from another country to arrive in the United States—not as tourists, not as conquerors, but as seekers? What if they came asking where hope had been born? Where was healing happening? Where truth might be found?

Would we know what to do with them?

Here's the unsettling truth Matthew is quietly revealing: Hope doesn't respect boundaries. God's movement isn't limited to familiar people or familiar places. And sometimes, the ones who recognize it first are the ones we least expect.

These strangers do not yet know the full story. They don't understand how fragile this child is, or how costly this hope will become. But they come anyway—because hope, when it's real, creates motion.

And maybe that's where this story begins to press on us.

And grounding makes them less useful to those who wish to harvest attention or shape opinion through distortion. The tools of exploitation still exist, but they lose their sting because the people of God are not wandering in the dark—they are standing in the light.

A community shaped by this kind of awareness becomes harder to divide. When we see how algorithms tilt the floor beneath us, we stop assuming that our neighbor is the enemy just because their feed looks different from ours. We learn to pause before reacting, to listen before judging, to ask deeper questions about what we are being told and why.

The conspiracies that once preyed on fear and confusion begin to lose oxygen. It becomes far easier to love our neighbor because we are no longer being pulled into manufactured outrage designed to sell ads or shape loyalties. Awareness clears space for compassion.

And as this awareness deepens, it reshapes our worship and our witness. We begin to understand how precious it is that God entrusts us with the real world—the one made of soil, breath, and Spirit. We reclaim our attention as an act of devotion. We reclaim our presence as a work of hope.

In a world that tries to overwhelm us with images, we learn again to behold the face of Christ in one another. Awareness does not merely protect us; it frees us. It makes room for joy. It restores dignity. It cultivates a form of life in which God's image can shine without distortion—steadily, quietly, and beautifully—amid all the artificial glow around us.

Awareness is not something we master in a day. It grows in us the way wisdom always has—through practice, patience, and the gentle guidance of God's Spirit. Today we have named the forces that blur our vision and pull our attention toward shadows. We have heard scripture's reminder that God created us with intention, dignity, and purpose. And we have imagined the kind of world that becomes possible when people live with their eyes open and their hearts steady in God's presence. That world is not far away. It begins quietly, with each of us.

So what comes next? We start small by choosing to be more present in our own lives. We pay closer attention to what draws our gaze. Notice when something online feels urgent or emotional, and ask who benefits from our reaction. We practice the kind of awareness that honors God's image in us—a

deliberate, thoughtful noticing that helps us stay rooted in the real world God has entrusted to our care.

These habits may seem simple, but they shape the soul. They help us live as people who are awake.

And as we practice, we begin to encourage one another. Families, friends, and faith communities become places where awareness is cultivated rather than consumed. We share what we are learning about ourselves, about our habits, about the forces that seek to claim our attention. We model a posture of curiosity and calm rather than fear or suspicion.

In doing so, we become a witness: a community that chooses light over distortion, truth over convenience, and real relationships over artificial persuasion.

Finally, we remember that this journey will continue beyond Advent. Each episode in this series is an invitation to deepen our awareness of God's presence—first around us, and eventually within us. God meets us in our waking. God calls us to see clearly so that we may love more fully.



And after the resurrection, the first gift he offers is not ownership, but the Spirit.

“Receive,” He says. That word alone challenges everything fear has taught us.

Renewal begins when we stop trying to own what was never ours to begin with—our breath, our creativity, our lives—and begin to receive them again as gifts meant to be shared.

This idea does not erase responsibility. It does not deny labor. And it certainly does not dismiss justice. But it does confront the lie that life is preserved by holding tighter.

The Spirit renews us by teaching us how to breathe again—together. To trust that God’s life is not diminished when it is shared. To believe that meaning is not lost when it flows beyond our control.

In a world tempted to escape our humanity, Scripture calls us back to it. In a culture obsessed with possession, the gospel offers participation. In a valley full of dry bones, God still breathes life.

And where the breath of God moves, renewal is not only possible—it is already beginning.

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Pastor Tommy

Dr. Mark Coeckelbergh, *AI Ethics.*  
Cambridge, MA: The MIT  
Press, 2020. (ISBN  
9780262538190).

Because beneath our arguments, our fears, our labels, and our policies, there is something shared here: a longing for a world that is more whole than the one we see. A hope that things don't have to stay the way they are. Different languages. Different cultures. Different paths. But a shared hunger for something more.

Matthew invites us to sit with that tension—not resolve it yet, just feel it. The strangers are on the road. The king is afraid. The world is about to be changed. And the question quietly forming is not just who are these strangers? It's what do we do when hope comes to us wearing a face we don't recognize?

The hope the Magi and most of us seek is this: That the world is not locked into the violence of its present powers. That history is capable of interruption. That God has acted before—and God will act again.

In a contemporary context, this group of hope-seekers is not seeking a newborn child. They are looking for evidence. Proof that the stories they've heard—about justice, dignity, shared humanity, freedom, and belonging—were not lies.

They've read the history. They've heard the testimonies. They know there have been moments when strangers were welcomed, when the poor were lifted, when power was restrained, when the vulnerable mattered. But those moments feel distant now—fragile, almost mythic.

So they take the risk to search for them again. This hope is not optimism. It is not a belief that things will naturally improve. It is the conviction that something truer than the present order exists—and can be found.

That is the hope Epiphany reveals. But power, when threatened, does not point toward hope. When outsiders are treated as threats rather than witnesses, we are no longer just rejecting people—we are rejecting the possibility that hope might come to us from beyond our own borders.

Hope shows up among the working poor because they cannot afford the illusion that the world is already as it should be. They know the system is broken because they live inside its fractures. Among them, hope is not abstract. It is not ideological. It is embodied. Hope looks like survival. Like resilience. Like shared bread. Like faith practiced without applause.

Those we label as strangers often carry with them memories of hope forged under pressure. Not theological hope, but hope tested by loss, migration, endurance, and faith. They are not bringing something dangerous. They are bringing something remembered.

And the tragedy Matthew hints at—and that we are now living inside—is this: when fear governs us, we stop listening to those who have already learned how to hope without power.

Our companion book, *Accidental Saints*, reminds us that this is how God has always worked: not by standing above suffering, but by entering it; not by erasing difference, but by dwelling among those the world overlooks. Nadia Bolz-Weber writes, "I have come to realize that all the saints I've known have been accidental ones."

Hope, in the biblical story, does not arrive armored. It arrives exposed. This is the hope we have been afraid we lost.

Over the past year, many have wondered whether compassion still has a place in public life. Whether welcome is still possible. Whether dignity can survive fear. Whether strangers can still be seen as neighbors. Matthew's answer is quiet but firm: Yes—but not where you've been told to look.

Hope survives among those who live without guarantees. Among the working poor. Among families who know what it means to be one decision away from displacement. Among people who carry memory rather than control.

The Holy Family is not missing from the story. They are simply not where power expects them to be. The Magi recognize this because they are willing to kneel. They bring gifts not to secure influence, but to honor presence. And then Matthew tells us something crucial: they leave by another road.



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## Important Updates:

Dear Friends of Asbury CDC,

As *Giving Tuesday* approaches, we are reminded of the incredible generosity that helps Asbury CDC continue its mission to serve our neighbors. But today, we are reaching out with an *urgent* need that simply cannot wait.

Due to the ongoing **Federal government shutdown**, many of our Flint residents are being hit hard. Some government employees have been **furloughed or are working without pay**, and **SNAP/EBT benefits have not been renewed** for numerous families. As a result, more households than ever are turning to us for help.

Through our **Help Center, Food Pantry, and Soup Kitchen**, Asbury CDC is working tirelessly to make sure no one in our community goes hungry. But the growing demand has placed a tremendous strain on our resources — and we need your help to keep up.

Your gift today will directly provide food, supplies, and hope for those facing uncertainty. While Giving Tuesday is around the corner, our neighbors need us *now*.

Please consider making a donation today so we can continue to stand in the gap for Flint families who need it most.

Thank you for your compassion and continued support. Together, we can ensure that no one in our community is left hungry or forgotten during this difficult time.

With gratitude,  
**Kimberly Sims**  
Finance Director  
Asbury Community Development Corporation

Our mailing address is:  
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Hope, once found, rearranges direction.

This is the work of Epiphany—not just seeing differently, but choosing differently. Recognizing that when God shows up among the vulnerable, neutrality is no longer possible. We either return to Herod, or we take another way home.

This is where the story turns toward us.

If hope has felt lost, it may be because we've been looking for it where it cannot live. If strangers unsettle us, it may be because they are closer to the truth than we are comfortable admitting.

Epiphany does not ask whether we believe hope exists. It asks whether we will follow it once it reveals itself. Not upward. Not inward. But outward—toward mercy, courage, and costly love. And like the Magi, we are left with a choice: to protect what makes us feel safe, or to trust that the hope found among the least is strong enough to lead us home.

Strangers rarely meet us where we are comfortable. They meet us at thresholds. At borders and doorways. At moments when we have to decide who we are and what we trust. The fear we feel at those moments is real—but it is also revealing because what unsettles us most is not the strangers themselves, but the possibility that welcoming them will change us.

Matthew shows us that God does not avoid thresholds. God enters them. The Magi stand at the threshold of a house. Joseph and Mary will soon stand at the threshold of exile. And Epiphany asks us the same question: when God shows up as a stranger, do we close the door—or do we cross over?

Thresholds are holy not because they are safe, but because they are honest. They tell us the truth about what we love, what we fear, and who we trust to guide us through change. Hope is not the absence of fear. Hope is the courage to cross a threshold anyway.

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Pastor Tommy

Nadia Bolz-Weber. *Accidental Saints: Finding God in All the Wrong People*. NY: Convergent Books, 2015. (ISBN 978-1-60142-755-7 ).

Jenna Russell. "Massachusetts Church Keeps Anti-ICE Nativity Scene, Defying Diocese Leaders." © NY Times, Dec. 8, 2025. Retrieved from: [link](#)