

“Darkness and Light”

2nd Sunday of Christmas/Boar’s Head Sunday

January 4, 2026

By Rev. Dr. Glenn Hink

I. Introduction

Today is Boar’s Head Sunday. It’s the 18th Annual Boar’s Head. It’s becoming a tradition at 1st Church.

The history of the Boar’s Head goes back 1000 years to Norman England. Life was short, chaotic, and difficult for most people. Infant mortality rates were very high. Most people were peasants and tried to stay one step ahead of starvation. There was no modern medicine or antibiotics. And people lived subject to the whims of the king and queen. Only the nobility dared to believe the illusion that they had some control in their lives. There are reasons it is called “the Dark Ages.”

The wild boar was the symbol of that darkness and certainly looked the part. Wild and unpredictable, the boar ruled the forests of England. The boar was a menace for most people; a symbol of the evil and darkness that could break into your life at any time. A boar was the last thing you wanted to meet walking through the forest.

An ancient legend tells of a young Oxford student walking through the forest reading the works of the philosopher Aristotle. From out of nowhere the student was charged by a wild boar. The legend tells of the quick-thinking student thrusting the book of Aristotle’s philosophy down the throat of the boar. The legend goes on to say that the boar was overcome, and the deadly threat ended. While some people probably took the story literally, most knew it was a myth; darkness and chaos in life are overcome by reason. At large dinners when the boar’s head was paraded through festive halls the legend would be told, and people would remember, and hope.

In time the pagan legend and celebration would be adopted by the Christian Church. The boar’s head still symbolized evil and chaos. But the boar was overcome by the teachings of Christ and the Church, symbolized by light.

And so the legend was very real for people. The boar did still run wild in the forests. Chaos and evil and darkness were also still a part of life. But at the same time the message of Jesus Christ and the power and grace of God gave people hope. The boar was a real threat, but not the final power. It was darkness and light, sin and grace, death and resurrection.

II. Text and Exegesis

And so as Matthew begins to tell the story of Jesus Christ, he wants to say the same type of thing; darkness and light, evil and love, chaos and hope. God’s plan of salvation happens in real life, this real life, where there are still “wild boars.”

Matthew is the only gospel to tell the story of the “kings,” or better named “magi.” He invites us to wonder about the different responses to Jesus Christ. One on hand you have the magi. And on the other you have King Herod. The magi may have been Zoroastrian astrologers from the distant region of Persia. We don’t know for sure. But what we do know is they were strange and exotic foreigners. The magi were not Jews. They didn’t follow Jewish religious practices. They didn’t study the Torah. They came from a distant land and culture. They spoke and dressed differently. And yet they see the signs and follow a star and ask for directions and bring gifts fit for a king. Matthew is telling us that God is doing something completely new in the birth of Jesus. People as strange as these magi will know the truth about Jesus and believe.

But the story is different for King Herod. Even though he is a Jew and a “hometown guy,” his reaction is opposite. He is deeply established in how things are. He uses religion and his great building projects and all his power to serve his purpose, his colossal ego. His narcissism knows no bounds. He takes all threats and rumors of threats seriously. In fact, Herod had one of his wives and two of his sons killed because he thought they were plotting against him. The Romans used to joke that it was better to be a dog than a family member in Herod’s house because you had a better chance of survival.

So when the magi come to Herod and innocently and earnestly ask, “Where is the child who has been born ‘king of Jews?’” they have Herod’s full attention. Threats are taken seriously. There is only one king, and it’s Herod. I can imagine everything in the palace stopped as people wondered what would happen. Indeed “all Jerusalem was frightened.”

And so Herod wants an answer: “Where? Where is this king to be born?” The Bible scholars go to work. And they find the answer, “Bethlehem.” The 8th C BCE prophet Micah foresaw the Messiah coming from Bethlehem. They tell Herod. And Herod tells the magi. And then he adds a request, Come back and tell him where they find this baby in Bethlehem. Herod says he too wants to honor this child. The magi probably do not know Herod has another plan.

So they go to Bethlehem and find the child. They give their gifts. In the gifts and joy and honoring Jesus they show their belief. People as strange as magi come to believe. In the story Matthew is telling us that this child is much more than the Jewish Messiah. And warned in a dream, the magi do not return to Herod. This is the light. Then comes the darkness.

Read Matthew 2:13-23.

The darkness comes. Herod is not to be trifled with. But Joseph is warned in dream. He and Mary and the baby escape to Egypt. There they are out of Herod’s reach. And as God first called Israel, the people of God out of Egypt in the Exodus, so God will call his Messiah out of Egypt for form the new people of God.

And then the darkness descends. Herod, who will stand no rivals, will take no chances. His self-delusion and ego put him opposed to God. What are other lives to him? Nothing. In his rage and jealousy and megalomania all the children in and around Bethlehem two years old and younger are killed. If he can’t get just one, he will get them all. It’s just collateral damage for

Herod. Not all are drawn to the light. Some are at home in the dark and will do what they can to keep it that way because it serves their purposes. Such was Herod.

But in time Herod dies. And God's plan and purpose are still alive. They have been kept safe in Egypt. So the time comes. Joseph brings Mary and Jesus back. But he's wary. He remembers their escape. Herod Archelaus rules in his father's place. Joseph decides to go a long way from the power and politics of Jerusalem. Instead they settle into the quiet town of Nazareth. It is from there that the plan and purpose of God in the Messiah will move forward.

III. Theological Discussion

So if Jesus is the Messiah, where's the fullness of God's kingdom? If Jesus is the light, why is there still darkness? If Jesus is the Messiah, why is it stories of magi AND Herod? Or on this Boar's Head Sunday we might ask, if Jesus triumphs over evil and sin, why does the boar still run wild in the forest? That is the question Matthew is addressing as he begins the story of Jesus. And we wonder about that too. Sometimes it sounds like, if Jesus is God's Savior why is life often less than we hope?

Presbyterian pastor and author Frederick Buechner tells a story I thought of while wondering about the magi and Herod. The story comes from Buechner's book *Telling Secrets*. I've told the story before. But I think it is so good it bears hearing again. Buechner writes:

"I remember sitting parked by the roadside once, terribly depressed and afraid about our daughter's illness and what was happening to our family, when out of nowhere a car came along down the highway with a license plate that bore on it the one word out of all the words in dictionary that I needed most to see exactly then. The word was TRUST. TRUST. Now what do you call a moment like that? Something to laugh off as a type of joke that life plays on us sometimes? Or is it the word of God? I am willing to believe that it is a bit of both. But for me it was an epiphany; an appearance of God. The owner of the car turned out to be, as I suspected, a trust officer in a bank. And not long ago, having read an account I wrote of the incident somewhere, he found out where I lived and one afternoon brought me the license plate itself. That license plate now sits propped up on a bookshelf in my study. It's rusty around the edges and a little battered. And it is also as holy a relic as I have ever seen. (And when I sense any darkness closing in now, I take a look at that license plate, remember the story, and I TRUST.)"

A wild boar and light, Herod and magi, worry and a license plate; what's being said is the salvation and work of God happen in real life, this life. Boars are still in the forest. "Herods" still rage against the good ways of God. Depression and worry still rock our lives. But in the midst of those things there is light, and there are magi, and there are epiphanies of God's presence with us. And so when the darkness feels like it's closing in we look, remember the story, and TRUST.

Or as I will proclaim this afternoon at the Boar's Head Festival:

"Now, be of good cheer, live in peace and look to the New Year with hope and joy. Know the child born in Bethlehem still: Give rest to the weary; forgiveness to sinners; peace to

those who love him; and new life to those who follow him. Evil shall be overcome. The Boar will not run wild forever. The light still shines in the darkness.” Amen.