

Epiphany/Renewal of Baptism

Matthew 2:13-23

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... 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 Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they were no more."

This past Wednesday, January 6, was "Epiphany".

Epiphany is defined as: "an illuminating discovery or revelation; something new is revealed" causing a change in direction and life. (chug.com)

For Christians: "Epiphany is the celebration of God's manifestation or self-revelation to the world in Jesus Christ...The symbolism of light is important: not only because of the star that guided the magi, but as it relates to the bright dawning of God's self-revelation in Christ." (PCUSA website)

On Epiphany, which marks the end of Christmas, Christians read in Matthew 2, the story of the Magi following the star in the East to the house where the infant Jesus now lived with his parents. There they offer their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Anyone who has been a part of a children's Christmas pageant or put up their nativity set, know that these Sages, like the Shepherds and Angels, have an important place in the Nativity of Christ.

We love to tell this story, or at least this part of the Nativity story. However, there is, as the late Paul Harvey reminded us each week, "the rest of the story".

And that involves one person who is consistently left out of the Epiphany story, King Herod.

He is a key figure in the story of the birth of Jesus, and the Wise Men's visit. Yet, no Christmas pageant has ever had a child dress up to play King Herod, and for good reason!

By various scholarly accounts, "Herod was a Jewish puppet king who maintained his own and his family's relative comfort by capitulating to the Roman oppressors and sacrificing the rest of his people to their whims."
(Professor Amy Lindeman)

Herod loved power, inflicted incredibly heavy taxes on the people, and resented the fact that many Jews considered him a usurper. In his last years, suffering an illness that compounded his paranoia, he turned to cruelty and in fits of rage and jealousy turned on close associates, including by some reports, his own sons, killing them." (Carson and Wikipedia)

And that is probably why we have conveniently left Herod out of the Christmas pageants and Epiphany story. Nobody wants to hear about a corrupt ruler that is so narcissistic, paranoid, deceitful, cruel, and afraid of losing his power that he is willing to kill and destroy anyone who threatens his power, including the vulnerable children in order to obliterate the possibility of another ruler in the form of an infant, that would dare challenge him.

So we simply focus on a cute baby, his parents, the Magi, the star they followed, and the gifts they brought.

My spouse, Rev. Staci Marrese-Wheeler, in reflecting on Herod's very real presence in the birth narrative, writes: "But there he is, in the midst this story, King Herod. Unlike most villains, who we 'love to hate' in fictional Christmas stories, Herod doesn't experience redemption. His heart doesn't grow three sizes bigger when he experiences the joy of Christmas, like the Grinch. Herod doesn't have a personal conversion and become generous and caring of the poor, like Scrooge does. No, Herod stays paranoid and selfish and cruel. He is angry with the wise men and anyone who threatens his power, even a child. And that is precisely why we can't ignore Herod at Christmas, or any other time of the year."

"Herod represents the possibility of the degradation of any of us given the right circumstances. He reminds us how far astray from our own innate goodness any of us can get, when wealth and privilege allow us to forget that we are part of an interdependent community of relationships (locally and globally). We need him in this story because we need to remember our responsibility to the larger community when we see someone in a place of power being abusive to innocents, the vulnerable, and their position of authority."

James Taylor, in his Epiphany song, "Home By Another Way" writes these lyrics: "Steer clear of royal welcomes, Avoid a big to-do, A king who would slaughter the innocents, Will not cut a deal for you..."

Yes, friends, we need to talk about King Herod, because, he "is part of humanity, whatever the age."

This past Wednesday, January 6, was Epiphany, and once again, Herod made his presence known. This time we witnessed Herod's violent, destructive, paranoia play out on television for all the world to see.

The late Ann Weems, in her poem, "The World Still Knows," says it best:

"The night is still dark
and a procession of Herod's
still terrorize the earth
(Inciting violence),
and killing (the children) to stay in power.
The world still knows its Herod's,
but it also still knows men and women
who pack their dreams safely in their hearts
and set off toward Bethlehem,
faithful against all odds,
undeterred by fatigue or rejection,
to kneel to a child."

And in kneeling, we offer our loyalty and lives to the Christ-child, rejecting at the same time, the ways of the Herod's who still terrorize and threaten our world with violence, death and destruction for going against their wishes.

My friends, "the Light of the world has come. And it has shone even in the darkest times that humanity has known, including this past Wednesday in America. And the darkness has not, and will not, overcome it."

This is what Epiphany is about, the season of the Divine Light shining in the darkness the world still knows in the form of hatred, evil, insurrection, domestic terrorism, violence, death, and the real threat that the "Herods" of our modern day still bring to our world and children.

As weary as we maybe after the past year, and events of the past week, with the threat of insurrection, the news of yet more shootings and violence in the streets, let us not be deterred by fatigue or fear. Rather, let us keep carrying the Light of God's love in our hearts and lives, letting it shine in and through us, daily, as it continues to bend the arc of justice to the day when all people will know God's true Peace.

Amen.