

RETURNING A DIFFERENT WAY

Sermon, January 6, 2019

Epiphany of the Lord Sunday

Texts: Isaiah 60:1-6, Psalm 72:1-19, Matthew 2:1-18

Today is Epiphany, the twelfth and final day of Christmas, the day we celebrate the revealing of the Messianic hope to the Gentile world in the arrival of the wise men offering their gifts of gold and frankincense. But wait, there's myrrh! (*a joke from my son*). The twelve days of Christmas are the days from Dec. 25 to Jan. 6. I am told that Epiphany, the twelfth day, is celebrated in the Eastern Orthodox tradition with more vigor than Christmas itself, because Epiphany signifies that day when the non-Jewish world became part of the Christmas story; in a way, it is "our" holiday. Today is also the day your true love will give you twelve drummers drumming.

Epiphany comes from a Greek word meaning "disclosure" or "revelation", it is the holiday which commemorates the revealing of Christ to the non-Jewish, Gentile world as represented by these Magi. Who were these wise men, these "Magi?" Well, no one knows for sure, but the best explanation I've read is that among the Persians (*roughly present day Iran, geographically*), the Magi were a special class or caste. They were the Persian philosophers and priests, their scholars; also, no one could be king in the Persian nations without first being officially enrolled in the "Magi" class or caste. Hence, the label "Wise Men," and also the tradition that they were kings ... at least **potential** kings. Others speculate they were called "Wise Men" because they stopped in Jerusalem to find out where the newborn King was ... so, unlike most men, they were wise enough to stop and ask directions. In any case, we **don't** know how many Magi came to visit; tradition has counted three because there were three gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh. Some believe there were as many as twelve to twenty ... as it wasn't really all that safe to travel through those remote lands, caravans tended to be larger than three riders ... however, tradition has given us three, along with their names, but the source of that tradition is found nowhere in the Bible. We just really don't know how many there were.

As I mentioned when we lit the fourth Advent candle of Peace two weeks ago, there was a problem that first Christmas with the arrival of the Prince of Peace. There was already a ruler over Bethlehem known as the King of the Jews. He was also known by the Romans as the King of Peace, for he had kept the peace in that troubled region of the Empire for some four decades by the time Jesus was born. The King of the Jews, the King of Peace, was Herod the Great. Herod was actually given by the Romans the title "King of the Jews" in 40 B.C. He reigned a total of fifty one years! (*For perspective, in the past fifty one years, we've seen ten administrations in our country ... Presidents Johnson, Nixon, Ford, Carter, Reagan, Bush I, Clinton, Bush II, Obama, and Trump. By contrast, Israel knew one administration over that time period*). We don't often see this part of the Christmas story portrayed in pageants, but the birth of the Prince of Peace sparked a conflict, a bloody atrocity of state-sponsored terrorism, as all the male children under two years of age in Bethlehem were slaughtered by order of the King of Peace as a "peace-keeping" measure to ensure stability; he would brook no rival who might spark a revolt! The family of Jesus then became refugees, fleeing to Egypt for safety and shelter.

If we just go by the facts and figures, Herod the Great had a pretty good administration. He kept the order; he kept the economy strong during most of his reign. He conducted tremendous building programs throughout the country. He set to work on an ambitious and massive renovation of the Temple beginning in 19 BC (*the renovation was completed some eighty-two years later in 63 A.D. Unfortunately, it wouldn't last long. Just seven years after its completion, the Temple would be utterly destroyed, razed by the Romans in 70 A.D.*). Largely because of this renovation, for the most part, the religious leaders favored him. Though Herod taxed the people heavily, he always managed to pull food out of the reserves in hard times in order to keep the people fed. Herod had the politician's amazing knack for stealing from the people and then making them feel thankful for whatever morsels he would give back to them in hard times. As mentioned, Rome, the occupying power, was pleased with Herod. He always paid his tribute on time, and he kept order and "peace" in what had always been a troublesome part of the empire. As a vassal king, Herod's job was to help the people live with an occupying army, to help the people live with the way it is. But at least things were secure under Herod. That's why the people called him Herod the Great. They loved him. They hated him. They loved the sense of stability he gave them. They hated what it cost.

Herod was just absolutely paranoid about maintaining power and stability. Herod killed members of his own family who he thought were a threat to his administration and reign, murdering his brother-in-law by drowning, executing his wife for alleged unfaithfulness, imprisoning and eventually executing his mother-in-law, ordering the strangulation of two of his own sons as well as a few of his nephews, all of whom he saw as threats

to his reign. This King of Peace had them all killed because he wanted to maintain the peace, as he saw it. So when the Magi show up and asked, "Where is the one born king of the Jews?" Matthew borders on understatement in saying Herod was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. Everyone in Jerusalem knew Herod would brook no rival, and as we read he eventually ordered the slaughter of all the small boys of Bethlehem. Some historians believe one of Herod's illegitimate sons, Antipater, was among those slaughtered, a convenient way to rid himself of yet another potential rival ... another "peace-keeping" measure to ensure stability in his reign.

Herod the Great. The people loved him. And they hated him. Everybody loved what he could do for them, but hated what it cost.

I've mentioned this before when we've looked at this passage, but on a more allegorical and personal level, I would venture to say that in many of our lives, some Herod has gained power. Herod is the name of whatever it is that offers you a measure of stability and satisfaction that you crave at a price you really can't afford. This "Herod" may do so much for you. But he *takes* so much in return. You love what it does; you hate what it costs. But no matter how taxing it is, you just keep paying ... because at least your "Herod" helps you cope with how it "is." For some I've known in years past, "Herod" is the name of a workaholic drive to succeed in spite of it sucking away our time and our energy and our lives and souring our most cherished relationships. We love the accolades, the promotions, the money, but we can't stand the costs of alienated families and joyless homes and loss of health. For others, "Herod" might be the substances we use and abuse ... the drugs, the alcohol ... we love the fleeting pleasure of what it does for us, but we can't stand the huge cost of wasted money, wasted time, wasted health and fractured relationships. For others, and increasingly so these days, the cheap (*yet devastatingly destructive*) "thrills" of the insidious side of the internet can be our Herod. The internet is rightly called the "web," because it has the deadly potential to really entangle us (*as someone put it, we may have smart phones, but we don't have wise phones ... so much depends on the wisdom of how we use these marvelous innovations whether the effect will be good or ill*). No matter how much you may rationalize it, each click of the mouse that carries you to that dark side of this Herod, Internet the Great, each click is putting dollar bills into the pockets of the brutal thugs marketing abuse, human misery, human trafficking; you are basically aiding and abetting the suffering of those being abused and funding the activity of what is, frankly, demonic ... and if that doesn't bother you, it should! It is also exacting a terrible cost on your psyche.

Or "Herod" may be an anger that has mastered you for too long. We wouldn't know how to live without it; we've grown used to coping with what's wrong in our lives by angrily putting the blame on others. That blame may or may not be justified, but that's almost beside the point. There is a sermon in itself here, but people are always going to do us wrong on some level or another, because all people are imperfect ... we just have to learn to deal with it. Life is just too short to dissipate energy and time brooding and festering on such inevitabilities. But some of us can't deal with it, and we reason that at least our anger gives us a way to live with how it is. We know that anger ... anger is my friend, and it helps me cope. But at what a cost! As mentioned a few weeks back, anger is an acid which corrodes its container from within.

No one likes to be addicted. No one likes to be angry. In fact, we hate it. But it's amazing how comfortable we can get with it over time. And before you know it, this addiction, this hurt, this anger, this "Herod" is running your life, sabotaging your life and your relationships more than you care to admit. Nobody likes Herod, but we can't let go of him. We hang on to his reign in our life like a person who has grabbed a live electric wire, and it hurts so much but we just can't let go! Those around us see us writhing in such pain and they say, "Come on, why don't you just let go of it?" But we know it's not that easy. We can't drop it and/or let go of it by ourselves. We got to be helped; we have to be pulled free by a savior. That's what the message of Christmas is all about! Jesus came to establish a new kingdom that would free us. Your Herod, by the way, will continue to do everything he can to kill Jesus' influence in your lives. If he can do anything to keep you away from Jesus, if he can do anything to keep you away from Jesus' redeeming and saving influence in your life, he will do it. But there is a new King in our lives, a King that wants to set us free to be how God created us to be.

Let's learn a lesson from the wise men. Note that after they bowed before King Jesus, the newborn Prince of Peace, they walked away from King Herod. We are told they were warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, so they obediently returned home *differently*. They returned by a different route, they returned from their encounter with the newborn king by walking away from King Herod. Let's follow their lead in this new year! Once we have bowed our knee in worship of the newborn King, we, too, should return home *differently* ... by resolving to walk away from Herod.

Herod is not your king anymore.