

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

Matthew 2:1-12
 Jeremiah 31:7-14
 Psalm 84
 Ephesians 1:3-6,15-19

January 5, 2020
 The Second Sunday after Christmas

I want to begin this morning by reading a few more verses from Matthew Chapter 2. Our lectionary leaves us with a clean, happy ending as the Wise Men come to pay homage to Jesus. The lectionary reading as it stands allows us to tie up our Christmas story in a lovely, familiar package. It makes us feel good and so if we end at verse 12 we can stay secure in the notion that Jesus came into the world to bring peace and love and harmony.

But, just so we don't become too comfortable, let's read a little farther, through verse 18...

13 Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.' ¹⁴Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, ¹⁵and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.'

16 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. ¹⁷Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: ¹⁸'A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.'

Although we like to end our story at the manger, the reality was much more gruesome and hostile. The birth of Jesus came in the midst of extreme violence and pain. It wasn't a pivotal point toward peace...at least not in the moment. It was a catalyst that drove paranoia, fear, and anger. There is no way I can ever imagine what those times must have been like. The world didn't change just because the Messiah had entered it. In fact, it seems to have gotten worse.

It left me wondering...What was it like to live in the time of Herod? It seems so far away from the world we know. But, is it?

King Herod, a man driven by his own self-preservation, by the threat of losing power, and by his anger at any one who would not bow down to his rule. So hungry was he to have control that he ordered the killing of an untold number of human lives. That's the way we talk about Herod today, as a monster.

Yet, at the same time that we quickly point to him as a monster, he was also a ruler who made sure his kingdom was prosperous, important, and powerful. As Matt Skinner, Professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary points out,

“Herod was no madman seething on his throne pulling the wings off butterflies. Many of his contemporaries saw him as a savior in his own right. Evil rarely presents itself as a beast with horns, fangs, and claws. Usually it dresses itself up in respectability. It burrows into systems that we rely on to keep our societies from spinning into chaos.”

The people needed Herod, or so they thought. Their security and prosperity were more important to them than the injustices taking place right under their noses. Skinner goes on to state an important consideration...

“Evil rarely acts alone. Tyranny and arrogance can’t exist in a vacuum. They demand accomplices. They survive because their enablers are also contributors....Herod was a savvy politician who knew how to use favoritism, brutality, deception, and arrogance to advance his ends. Those are the tools used by people who believe they will never be held accountable.”

Herod wasn't going out killing children himself. He had people faithful to his purpose. Beholden to his power and promises. Willing to do egregious acts for the promise of their own self-preservation, economic growth and access to abundant resources. Things were good...why rock the boat?

Now the harder question...

Is this story really that foreign to us today? Greed, self-preservation, power, fear, arrogance, prosperity, nationalism. These qualities of Herod are all too familiar if we look closely at our world today and if we look closely at ourselves. As we continue to praise the coming of the Messiah, maybe we also need to reflect on how we might still be holding Herod in our hearts.

Where have we allowed these qualities to become our norm? Where have we become blind to pride and injustice and fear to the point where we are more interested in keeping our comfort intact? What have we grown used to? Do we honor God or do we honor Herod?

I want to suggest that the answer is right in front of us...with the courage of the wise men. The wise men who weren't concerned with simply keeping things the way they were. The wise men who had the courage to stand up to the abuse of power in their midst. The wise men who were willing to say - we can do better.

And to be sure...they didn't have to make that choice. They could have fallen right in line with what Herod had commanded of them. Yet, they chose blessing over brutality. Love and mercy over violence. Peace and justice over hate and anger.

When they confidently turned their backs on Herod and turned towards Jesus, they put everything on the line. But they did it because they knew it was good and right and holy. Characteristics they didn't see in the world around them but they saw in Jesus. Characteristics of love, mercy, peace, and justice. And from their courageous and faithful actions, we find our example of what it means to be courageous and faithful followers of Christ today.

Being courageous and faithful followers of Christ means standing up to the Herod within our societies and also the Herod within our own hearts. It means bringing healing and restoration to that which is broken in the world. It means having the wisdom to discern when power has overcome peace. When greed has overcome mercy. When fear has overcome love.

What might you learn from the wise men this year?

My prayer for you is that you allow their courage to resonant through your heart. Be willing to be courageous and faithful followers of Christ today. Amen.