

Trinity UMC Iron Mountain, MI January 3, 2021
Pastor Geri Hamlen

Music for the Scripture *We Three Kings #254*

This song just tells us one little condensed part of a much bigger story. It's a story that almost sounds like a fairy tale with Wise Men from a foreign country and a Bad King and big city people and a small town and angels and Mary and Joseph and Jesus...hear the words of the Lord.

Scripture Matthew 2: 1 – 12 (CEV)

When Jesus was born in the village of Bethlehem in Judea, Herod was king. During this time some wise men¹ from the east came to Jerusalem² and said, "Where is the child born to be king of the Jews?

We saw his star in the east³ and have come to worship him."

³When King Herod heard about this, he was frightened/worried, and all Jerusalem felt the same as their king.

Herod brought together the chief priests and the teachers of the Law of Moses and asked them, "Where will the Messiah be born?"

⁵They told him, "He will be born in Bethlehem, just as the prophet wrote:

⁶'Bethlehem in the land of Judea, you are very important among the towns of Judea.

From your town will come a leader, who will be like a shepherd for my people Israel."

⁷Herod secretly called in the wise men and asked them when they had first seen the star.

⁸He told them, "Go to Bethlehem and search carefully for the child.

As soon as you find him, let me know. I want to go and worship him too."

⁹The wise men listened to what the king said and then left.

And the star they had seen in the east went on ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.

They were thrilled and excited to see the star.

¹¹When the men went into the house and saw the child with Mary, his mother, they knelt down and worshiped him.

They took out their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh¹² and gave them to him.

Later they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, and they went back home by another road.

Message *'What Herod Said'*

This telling of the Wise Ones is one of those stories that we hear on the second Sunday after Christmas—every year! Some years I have preached about the gifts...which are pretty cool. Some years I have focused on what Mary must have thought. Other years I have wondered what it was like for the Wise Ones to travel so far and then to go home by an different road. This year, we have been considering what various people said about the birth of Jesus so it's only right that King Herod get his moment in the lime-

light. What Herod said is pretty important for us...even now...to help us understand the intersection of the Church that follows Jesus and the Governments in the world and in history. So let's look at what Herod said...

Could you tell that Herod heard about the birth of a new King, a King of the Jews...through the grape vine? The Wise Ones didn't go to his palace the minute they hit town. No, they asked among the tradespeople and the Jerusalem street people and word got back to King Herod. Yes, Herod must have had a pretty good surveillance system set up...and when he heard that foreigners were looking for a king to pay homage to...Herod was scared. He was frightened.

It's hard for us to imagine why a Roman appointed King would fear the birth of a baby but the people who were there in Jerusalem, in the court and yes, even in the Jewish Temple...they would have known and understood. Because Herod had already shown himself to be insecure and even paranoid. And willing to go to any lengths to hang onto the power position he had attained. The people of Jerusalem at the time knew that Herod had already killed his second wife (he had 10 wives altogether in his life-time) and he had killed 3 of his sons in order to eliminate any possible competition from the younger men. That's really hard for us to imagine isn't it? Why wouldn't he just include those young sons in his family business and keep his wives as trophies, on display? I guess he was that scared and insecure.

In addition, Herod was born into a Jewish family of successful soldiers and ruthlessly effective political men. It's impossible to say what he did or did not know about the Jewish prophecies and the 10 commandments and the holiness codes but it's pretty obvious from the historical record that he didn't live within the letter of the Jewish law, much less the spirit.

If, as word on the street would have it, there was a king of the Jews, a Messiah born at that time, Herod would have good reason to be scared...of judgment, of losing his power, of a turn over in the political stability of the day. So he was frightened and, as we well know today, ...when the King is scared, everyone is scared because there's nothing scarier than a frightened man with a lot of soldiers and power. Yes, when the king is scared, bad stuff can happen and people can die.

But not right away in this particular situation. Herod kept his cool and went to the Jewish experts—the priests of the Temple and the scribes of the people and he asked them, shrewdly enough, where the Messiah was to be born. They brought him up to speed on the prophecies of Micah and Ezekiel and then Herod went into action. And it was a sneaky, sly and covert operation that he put together. He sent for the Wise Ones in secret and compared notes with them. What Herod knew, combined with what the foreigners knew was all the King needed to know. Something was going on in Bethlehem and that star in the sky was leading the way. So Herod decided to save his soldiers for later and enlisted the Wise Ones saying:

"Go to Bethlehem and search carefully for the child.

As soon as you find him, let me know. I want to go and worship him too."

It's hard for us to understand, perhaps, the irony of what Herod said here...but the people who were there, the people who heard this story told over and over again, even many years later would have snickered at what Herod said. Like...sure you wanna go and worship the new born Messiah too. After killing 3 sons and a wife, you're going to bend a knee to a baby...like right.

Maybe the Wise Ones believed him. But it's hard to imagine anyone in the know, in Jerusalem, trusting the word of King Herod. Of course, maybe that trust level depends on how much experience you've had with bad guy kings...and how susceptible you are to hearing what you want to hear rather than recognizing that in diplomatic relationships, and in the halls of human power brokering, anything can be said to keep the wheels of commerce rolling and the negotiations of earthly powers moving in selfish and greedy ways.

Whatever the case, the Wise Ones listened to what Herod said and, as we know, followed the star. Found the little one, Jesus...Experienced great joy. Knelt down and paid homage. Gave gifts and decided NOT to go back to Herod...warned in a dream, it says. And so they left for their own country by another road. Shrewd of them, to be sure.

But that's not the end of the story...Herod still had more to say.

v. 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 what he had learned from the wise men.

We know that Joseph, like the Wise Ones, was also warned in a dream to flee to Egypt with Jesus and Mary but that part of the Gospel of Matthew is only read once every 3 years.

I've wondered why. It's as though our good church sensibilities don't want to be reminded very often of just how awful bad kings can be. Especially when their fear turns to fury and they don't get what they want.

I wonder...Has the Church become over eager about respecting human governments? Preferring to keep the peace than to speak the truth to the unholy fear and rage that prompt such inhumane and cruel actions from frightened and angry kings?

I find myself grieving the death of the innocent toddlers who had the misfortune of being born around the same time as Jesus—under the reign of King Herod. What a trauma that must have been for the community in and around Bethlehem.

I have wondered this year for the first time, what would have happened if the foreigners from the East had been really Shrewd and even courageous, as well as wise. Political players themselves. What if they had decided to go back to Herod after all with the sad news that the baby did not survive child birth. The Messiah to come wasn't sturdy enough for the stable and the manger and the exposure to the cold. Mary's milk didn't drop or Joseph couldn't scrounge up enough food to keep them strong enough. That would have been a lie, of course. But how many innocents would have been saved? How many parents would have been spared the heartache agony of watching their babies killed by the soldiers of Herod who only had to say...'Go and kill' for it to be done.

It's heavy on my mind but...then I remember. That's not what happened, is it? That's not the story we were given.

I have spoken before with you about the desire to re-write the Holy Word. Who can blame us? But we must resist that temptation and look at the ugly reality that the Word tells us. We have to try to fit ourselves to the Scriptures rather than asking them to fit themselves to us. So let's remember what we know is to come:

Jesus was safe in Egypt and his family returned.

The child did grow, as the Gospel of Luke tells us, and became strong, filled with wisdom and the favor of God was upon him.

And the day would come...when Jesus, God with us, would live and die for us in such a way that we can see, and feel, and know that even the most formidable of kings and nations can be healed and transformed by the power of God's Holy name.

As G.K. Chesterton wrote: 'There are powers in the universe greater than monsters, whether fairy tale or human monsters.' ...even limitless terrors have a limit...even shapeless enemies have enemies in the soldiers of God....there is something in the universe more mystical than darkness and stronger than strong fear.'

We can even say that there is a conspiracy bigger than all other conspiracies and that is what the story of Salvation teaches usⁱ...Jesus IS the Prince of Peace...the Lord of Lords and The story of the Epiphany—and all of the Christmas story—is part of the long and beautiful story about how God uses holy power, not human domination, in and through Jesus and in and through those of us who follow Jesus. God's holy work is Not to overpower us but to dwell among us and love through us.ⁱⁱ

What a blessing...a true gift that is...

No matter what Herod or any other bad king ever said or did or does going forward. God is always moving for transformation, healing and wholeness. Among the nations, the world and even us. Thanks be to God.

ⁱ <https://www.christiancentury.org/blog-post/sundays-coming/magi-camels-seriously-matthew-21-12> read 1/1/2021

ⁱⁱ <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/living-word/january-3-epiphany-matthew-21-12> read 1/1/2021