

January 3 2021 [Epiphany Sunday]

New Testament: Matthew 2: 1-23

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ² 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." ³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶ 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.'"

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸ 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." ⁹ When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹ On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

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." ¹⁴ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, ¹⁵ and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill 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. ¹⁷ Then 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."

¹⁹ When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, ²⁰ "Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead." ²¹ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. ²² But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. ²³ There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, "He will be called a Nazorean."

Sermon: “The Empty Manger”

Have you finished packing away your Christmas decorations yet?
 I’ve taken some of my decorations down
 – the garlands and Christmas cards and things like that,
 packed away for next year.
 And I’ve carefully stored my nativity set in its special box, too;
 it’s white ceramic and a little fragile,
 so I always wrap each piece in tissue paper
 and tuck them all away as gently and safely as possible.
 All the gifts are given away or unwrapped and put into use,
 and the reusable gift bags are all hidden away until next year.
 My Christmas tree is still up, though
 – I figure I can get away with that until
 at least the end of the week!

Before Christmas, our Advent worship series at St. Andrew’s
 peopled the nativity scene.
 We started all the way back with Isaiah
 and the distant light of the prophecy of a child born for us,
 whose names would be wonderful counsellor, mighty God,
 everlasting Father and prince of peace,
 and whose kingdom would have no end.

And then we added in Mary and Joseph, Jesus’ parents-to-be,
 with their trusting faith and willingness to act.
 From there, we moved on to the joy of the angels and shepherds,
 and a swift, night-time trip from sheep pasture to stable;
 and finally, the long, rumour- and hope-inspired journey
 of the Magi.

But now, Christmas is over,
 the nativity scene is back in its box,
 and it’s time to leave the warm and comforting glow
 of the stable behind;
 it’s time for a cold blast of reality,
 and for the story of King Herod.

Herod was an uncommonly brutal king.
 Even his own family, even his children,
 were not safe from his temper and hunger for power and influence.
 Herod was not, strictly-speaking, a proper king;
 he was a Roman client king,

which means that he had been
 put on the throne of Judea
 by Rome,
 and that his decisions and his kingdom
 were all subject and subordinate
 to the Roman Empire.

Herod was not, strictly-speaking, a proper Jew, either.
 Family lineage and ancestry was incredibly important to the Jewish people,
 and Herod's lineage had only been Jewish for a few generations.
 He was not one of God's people from way back when;
 the Idumeans, Herod's ancestors,
 had been forcibly converted to the Jewish faith
 about 100 years or so earlier.

Herod was ambitious and good at getting ahead in the world.
 As a young man, he excelled at currying favour with
 powerful Roman officials,
 ingratiating himself with them
 and becoming more and more powerful and important himself.
 As a military leader, Herod's brutality was condemned
 by the Jewish political and religious leadership,
 the Sanhedrin;
 but it didn't matter what they thought,
 because about forty years
 before the birth of Jesus, Herod was made client-king by Rome.

His brutality continued unchecked for his whole life
 and he was not well-liked by any of his people or by his family.
 As he was dying, Herod was so worried that no one would
 mourn his death
 that he tried to have several prominent and well-loved
 residents
 of the city of Jericho killed at the same time.
 That way, it'd look like there was
 appropriate public grieving
 when Herod died...
 ...Herod's children did not fulfill
 his dying wish
 for mass slaughter.

Herod was a terrible, violent and thoughtless king,
 caring only for himself and his own power and ambition.

When the Magi, guided by a dream from God,
managed to circumvent Herod's plan to kill the newborn King,
Herod's power-at-all-costs instinct kicked in.

Based on the information about the timing of the child's birth from the Magi
and the location from his own scribes and priests,
Herod estimated an age range and had every male child
that falls within that range killed.

Ordering the murders of Bethlehem's children aged two and under
was nothing in the long list of Herod's atrocities...
...but devastating to those losing their beloved sons,
as they added their voices to Rachel's wail of grief,
echoing down through the centuries.

Herod was afraid and all Jerusalem with him
of what this newborn king might mean.
The gospel writer carefully weaves many of the Old Testament prophecies
that the birth of Christ fulfills into his narrative of the Christmas story,
even connecting Jesus to Moses,
that great leader
that brought the people of God out
of the darkness of slavery in Egypt,
through the wilderness
and to the borders
of the Promised Land.

God had been promising his people a saviour, a messiah, for a long time.
Herod was right to be afraid.

The birth of Jesus,
of this new king and his new kind of kingdom,
meant that the hope God's people had held onto for centuries,
hope that the world was going to change
into something more like the kingdom of God
– that hope was being fulfilled.
The world was changing.

Herod, with his carefully constructed and brutally maintained power,
was unwilling to risk change in his world,

because that might mean losing control and authority,
and losing his own kingship in Judea.

And because he was afraid of losing his power and position, Herod lashed out.
If you can bear it, imagine with me
the fear and violence of this terrible day.
Palace soldiers, going house to house,
finding all the little boys and killing them,
searching each house and stable
and crawlspace and cupboard,
seeking Jesus in a very different manner than that phrase usually means.

It's a horrible story of an ancient crime,
of a long-passed day of long-ago fear and helplessness.

But there are a lot of horrible stories
and days of fear and helplessness right now, today, too.
There always are.

Today's horrible stories are about the tens of thousands of dead because of the pandemic,
about racism and injustice,
about lost jobs and homelessness in a cold Canadian winter,
about families losing loved ones
to everything from car accidents to COVID-19 to cancer.

Fear and helplessness are even more pervasive,
touching every aspect of our lives
from trips to the grocery store,
to visits with older or less healthy loved ones,
to our once more (still) empty church
on this first day of the new year.

Have you gotten angry with someone for not taking pandemic restrictions seriously enough?
Or have you been mad about being told what to do by public health
or the government?
It's the same fear; the same helplessness,
driving both angry responses.
We don't have a brutal and sadistic king to deal with,
but we do have this uncertain, sin-touched world
where our whole lives
can be knocked sideways
by things totally out of our control;
where things we value and need
– people, jobs, health, independence –
can be gone, just like that,

as swift and sudden as a palace guard
bursting through our door.

As bad as last year has been,
as bleak as 2021 is looking right now,
uncertainty, helplessness and trouble are constantly present,
every year
lurking at the edges of our vision some days,
taking up the whole of our view on other days.

When fearful and horrible days do come,
it might be tempting to batten down the hatches
until life settles down again,
to try and wait it out...
...or it might be tempting to stomp through trouble,
to carry on as stubbornly as possible,
pretending that it's all made up or easy to bear.

For Christians at Christmas, the big temptation is to build our nativity scene,
celebrate the birth of Jesus...
...and then stay, right there;
cocooned in Christmas vibes
and wrapped in the warm reflected glow
of angels and stars and baby Jesus,
tucked safe in his bed
with loving parents, well-wishers
and the gentlest of domesticated
animals gathered close.

It's so tempting to stay and wait by the manger
until the darkness passes and the world is a safe and gentle place, too.

But for faithful men and women of God,
the season of Epiphany is boots on the ground time.
The light of the world has come,
and God wouldn't have sent us light
if we didn't really need it.
Because the reality is
that the world is not
a warmly glowing, gentle place.

From the very moment of Jesus' birth,
in this violent response of Herod to Jesus,
we see the first iteration of the conflict that repeats,

again and again,
 between God's plans and promises
 and humanity's resistance to those plans unfolding and those promises being kept.

The light of the world is light *for* the world;
 as Christians, when our boots hit the ground in our communities,
 as we worship and serve and love others for Jesus' sake,
 we'd be completely missing the point of Christmas
 if we left the baby in his manger
 and stood there with him...
 ...because God
 certainly did not leave his Son there.

Among all the houses Herod's soldiers burst into,
 each room and cupboard, in every outbuilding
 and stable they searched through,
 each child they took, desperately seeking Jesus
 for all the wrong reasons...
 ...there was one empty stable with an empty manger.

Those soldiers wouldn't even have noticed it
 or recognised the significance
 of a manger filled only with hay,
 empty of the child that had lain there.
 But we do;
 we know what that empty manger means.
 It means that Herod failed
 and God did not.

The empty manger means
 that God's steady, well-planned protection
 and Joseph's faithful decisive action
 ensured that Jesus would be safe,
 that he'd grow up to be the saving light for this world.

The empty manger is the culmination of
 centuries of promises and prophecies and dreams,
 from Isaiah to the Magi to Joseph.
 The empty manger is a miracle,
 just as the baby that once slept there was.

The empty manger is a sign of hope,
 right in the middle of a calculated act of violence,
 driven by fear and ambition and worldly power,

Jesus being on his way to Egypt when Herod's soldiers came seeking...
 ...it means that no matter
 how bleak, how uncertain, how fearful our days are,
 in God, in Christ:
 there is hope.

When I say hope, I don't mean a hopeful, fingers-crossed kind of feeling.
 I don't mean gleeful anticipation,
 or a wish for something to happen,
 or wanting really hard.
 Christian hope is far more real and solid than that.

Hope is seeing the world and our lives in it as it is
 – the fearful and the good, the painful and the sweet –
 and looking at God, at Christ
 in the world and acting for us
 and then sinking all our faith and trust
 and love and action
 into the plan God has for us and for creation.

So there is hope in our God who creates us, redeems us and sustains us.
 There is hope in our God who sent his Son, born of a human woman,
 to live in our midst, to share in our suffering
 and to overcome death with resurrection.
 There is hope the good news of Jesus Christ,
 in this new king and new kind of kingdom,
 in the scriptures that shape our thinking
 and in the God that is still speaking
 in our lives today.

There is hope in our God who shares in our sadness
 over the losses we've born this year and the fear in our country right now,
 and there is hope in our God who does *not* share our uncertainty,
 because God is still in charge.
 There is hope in our God who calls us
 to rise above fear and uncertainty,
 to be his boots on the ground,
 carrying his light into the world
 and being instruments
 of hope, peace, joy and love.

We live in a world that is often full of horrible days,
 of fear and helpless uncertainty,

but we also live in a world where Herod failed
and the manger is empty
because God acted first and decisively for us.

As you finish packing away Christmas and begin a new year,
I urge you to take a moment and give thanks
for the way God was active and working during that first Christmas,
not simply through the birth of Jesus,
but also through that empty manger.

Because the empty manger means
that all the promise and unrealized potential of the baby in the manger
is fulfilled;

God's done it.

There is safety in dangerous times,
there can be peace instead of emptiness or uncertainty,
there is transforming grace poured out
into our lives,
we are saved
and God is with us.

There is hope.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.