

“A Small Threat Looming Large”

Matthew 2:1-12

January 8, 2012

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Epiphany of the Lord

Prayer: Guide us, O God, by your word and Holy Spirit, that in your light we may see light, in your truth find freedom, and in your will discover peace. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Surely Herod knew the phrase, “Beware of Greeks bearing gifts,” from Virgil’s *Aeneid*, referring to the wooden horse of Troy used by the Greeks to trick their way into the city. So you wonder what he thought of the Magi and their gifts to present to a newborn king?

There is desperation running through this story on almost every level. You’ve got a desperate leader and a desperate set of parents. The reality of the situation is this: Jesus had barely been born when those in power got scared and began behaving in ways scared people often do. According to scripture, the rumors of his birth sent shockwaves that rumbled all the way to the inner chambers of the emperor Herod and about sent him over the edge. It’s strange, isn’t it, how a little thing like that could be so threatening to someone so powerful? But maybe not.

As a character in scripture and as one who occupied a place on the world stage for a period of time, they don’t get much better than Herod. He’s so tragic—something of a lost soul, really. As a political leader he wasn’t a Jew, but neither was he a Roman. The Romans were his real bosses and Rome was where the political power of that time was concentrated. He was a “puppet” trying desperately to impress the real powerbrokers back in Rome while puffing himself up in order to impress and intimidate the poor, oppressed people in Israel. He may have been in charge of the country but in a real way, he was a man without a country. Like some pathetic character straight out of a Greek tragedy, Herod is so insecure, so frightened and so easily threatened and all so transparently so, that he almost elicits sympathy. Almost.

The problem with feeling sorry for him and others like him is that the world has suffered enough from the effects of fearful leaders who have done stupid things. Kathleen Norris, in her book *Amazing Grace*, has an entire chapter on Herod. She observes that,

Fear can be a useful defense mechanism, but when a person is always on the defensive, like Herod, it becomes debilitating and self-defeating. To me, Herod symbolizes the terrible destruction that fearful people can leave in their wake if their fear is unacknowledged, if they have power but can only use it in furtive, pathetic, and futile attempts at self-preservation. Herod’s fear is like a mighty wind; it can’t be seen, but its effects dominate the landscape.

He hears rumors of a birth—the birth of a baby whose parents are not yet married, and who are neither wealthy nor powerful. And yet somehow, this peasant baby has the title “King,” and Herod just can’t get this out of his mind. It haunts him. It threatens him. And then he meets some people who seem to know something about it.

Astrologers from the East, mysteriously guided by the stars and one star in particular, which has led them a little off course from their intended destination, but to Herod.

And Herod asks them, “Where can I find this baby? I’d like to go and worship him myself.” They weren’t called wise men for nothing. They could see right through his desperate insecure attempt at devotion and they knew that no king ever bows down to another king. In his asking, Herod tipped his hand and they could sense the lurking danger for that child. Desperate people do desperate things—sometimes stupid things. Perhaps Herod seemed too eager—too ready to accept whatever they had to say. And so they told him a lie and he jumped at it.

I thought about Herod as a political leader in terms of Shakespeare’s Richard III. It’s no secret that Shakespeare was drawn to political personalities. For all our complaining about the sometimes deplorable behavior of elected officials, there is something about us that has an insatiable appetite for stories involving deceit and political corruption. Throw in some sex and you’ve got a news feeding frenzy.

And Shakespeare’s Richard is the quintessential villain—the personification of a ruthless lust for power. A murdering, manipulating tyrant, who delights in his own sense of evil. And while his tactics are successful, ultimately, he does not prevail. Do you remember that scene at the end of the play? On the night before the battle in which he is slain, Richard is visited by the ghosts of his victims who charge him with his crimes and completely undermine his confidence. And Richard says, “I shall despair. There is no creature loves me. And if I die, no one shall pity me.”

Martin Marty once said, “Being a tyrant is an unhealthy occupation. The most common cause of [Chairman] Mao’s ill health,” he noted, “was his paranoia. This seems to be a general rule among those who have too much authority and no real friends.”

Perhaps to better understand the threat facing Herod, however, we need to at least acknowledge the reality that sometimes small things can rise up and become big things. Sometimes small, seemingly insignificant acts have a way of taking root, capturing the imagination and sweeping across an entire nation. “No, I’m not going to sit in the back of the bus...” said a forty-three year old seamstress on her way home from Christmas shopping in downtown Montgomery, Alabama. And it was a pivotal moment.

And there is also the sense in which only those who understand fear, namely, the fearful themselves, know how to effectively use it to intimidate and control and defeat those who stand in their way. When Franklin Roosevelt said, “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself,” he was not downplaying the very legitimate fear of fear itself. But what’s so threatening about a baby born in Bethlehem to poor parents?

Well, just maybe Herod was on to something? Here is at least one way I’ve thought about it and I ask you to hear me out on this. As an organization, the American Civil Liberties Union tends to anger and frustrate everyone at least some of the time, which probably means they’re doing their job. So when they defend the rights of those who have had their rights trampled on, we applaud them. But when they defend the Ku Klux Klan’s right to hold a public demonstration, we hold our collective breath and look the other way. And similarly, when they challenge the desire of conservative, politically active Christians in this country who want to place a manger scene on the capitol lawn, many people of faith are outraged and wonder why it’s a problem.

And yet I wonder about it on another level, on a level that I don't think the ACLU with its separation of church and state focus, is considering. Because I would propose to you that when you think about it, the very idea of that baby—that child-king being worshiped by other kings displayed in front of the places of power and influence in this country, is in many ways extremely threatening. Because behind that sweet, sentimental scene, something really radical and threatening is being portrayed.

That scene represents an overturning of everything. It symbolizes a new kind of reign where peace promises to replace the tried and tired methods of violence. It is a symbol of a reign where justice promises to replace the practices of injustice that have been tolerated for far too long. It is a symbol of a reign that promises us that love will ultimately prevail in a world where those who are different—foreign, perhaps, are often despised, and turned into trumped up enemies we are told to fear, only to advance someone's cause. And that manger scene is a symbol of a reign where the lowly are lifted up and the powerful are scattered from their thrones and that ought to be very threatening to those sitting in the thrones of power.

And I can almost guarantee you that any politician or group, advocating for an overtly Christian symbol like a manger scene in the public square is simply pandering to religious folks who don't know any better and who are afraid that their freedom of religious expression is somehow under attack, and they are not doing it for any of the theological reasons I just stated. Their basic understanding of Christianity needs some work and they ought to spend more time reading their Bibles instead of using them as weapons against conjured up opponents they tell us we need to fear. But it's always easier to prey on people's fears than it is to alleviate them.

Not too long ago I discovered something quite revealing about Herod. It too, further reminded me of Shakespeare's Richard III and his lonely lament the night before he died. When Herod was an old man and afflicted with what was probably arthritis, he would often go to a place in or near Jerusalem and sit in some hot baths in order to relieve his pain. He finally moved to Jericho and close to the end of his life, he ordered the most notable Jews from all parts of the nation to come to him in Jericho. When they arrived, Herod had them all locked up. And realizing how much people hated him, he gave the order that at the time of his death the most distinguished and notable Jews in the land were to be executed as a way of ensuring that there would be national mourning and not celebration.

Fearful people do desperate and sometimes unthinkable things. Fear can be a powerful debilitating force and much of the time our fears are irrational. There are things we need to fear but there are other things we need not fear. And perhaps for reasons you haven't shared with anyone, you are afraid this morning? Maybe in spite of all outward appearances that would indicate you've got it all together, your life is really on the verge of falling apart? And so you are afraid. Afraid of what is going to happen? Afraid of the future. Afraid of what people will think about you?

If you or someone you know is afraid, if you or someone you know needs to have their world turned upside down, I invite you to see again the manger. See again a king wearing swaddling clothes and in a manger, yet being worshiped by other kings bearing gifts. See a guiding star and hear angels singing in a world where shepherds had to stand guard. And know that it was into just such a troubled world—a world perhaps not unlike your own, that a voice pierced the cold dark night and declared to frightened people everywhere,

Fear not... for I bring you good tidings of great joy. Unto you a savior has been born.
Amen.