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St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, OH  
January 6, 2019; Epiphany Year C  
Text: Isaiah 60:1-6; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12; Psalm 72:1-7,10-14

What if We’re Herod?

The thing about familiar stories is that it can be especially hard to actually hear them. I mean, really hear them. I don’t know what your experience was of hearing that Gospel, but maybe like me you found yourself saying: “Yeah, yeah, yeah, wisemen, star, baby Jesus” Our minds subconsciously say, and we stop listening as we hear the Epiphany story again.

And to add to it, so much of this Epiphany story feels so dramatic and otherworldly. It can feel hard to connect with the movements of the story, With caravans of wise men traveling to see a child who was also a king and a messiah. Where do we find ourselves in a story so fantastic, that we know so well?

One way to try and connect on a deeper level with Biblical stories is to imagine ourselves in them.

And if you were to do that, where would you find yourself?

I once heard a sermon that did this with this text, And it stuck with me a long time.  “Are you the magi?” The preacher asked.  Are you on a journey to find Jesus that involves daring risk and adventure.  Do you intuitively trust yourself?  And are you willing to do something as adventurous as following a star?

The sermon went on, conflating some different versions of the nativity story (as we’re wont to do in the church): asking, “Are you the shepherds?”  Are you steady in your work, committed to your craft?  And in your steadiness, are you able to serve Christ and attend to his needs?

It was a good sermon that invited us to find ourselves in the story of Epiphany. It invited us to reflect on how we find Christ in our lives, Whether through risk and upheaval, Or steadfast loyalty and consistency.

I thought about recreating that sermon in some form today. Yet as I read our Gospel from Matthew, I found myself more and more aware of Herod. The preacher before me didn’t offer Herod as a character in whom we could find ourselves. And I get that: “Are the king who’s afraid of a baby?” Yeah, none of us would probably identify with him.
I mean, let’s face it: We never identify ourselves with the ‘bad guys’ in the Bible. It’s so much easier not to.
And Herod of all people – who would want to identify with him?
He was an insecure ruler.
As the king of the Jews, he was a man who was cunning in his leadership.
He was willing to switch sides, if it meant ensuring his survival.
He was terrified of betrayal, worried about conspiracies.
This was fueled in part because the people he ruled never fully accepted him as their leader.
But his fear led him to terrible acts...
He killed his wife and some of their children when they were suspected of conspiring against him.¹
And then of course, there’s the story that our Gospel selection leaves out today, of the murder of all children under the age of 2 in Bethlehem, to try and kill Jesus (Matthew 2:16-18).
That’s the day we mark in the church as the “slaughter of the innocents.”

Herod viewed everything as a game between winners and losers.
He wasn’t afraid to deflect accountability and responsibility,
And he was quick to label truth-tellers as obstructionists and troublemakers.²

It’s tempting, especially given such extreme description, to distance ourselves even further from this king – “Oh, that’s not me,” we might say.
And yet, one commentator this week stopped me in my tracks when she said:
“Rather than dismissing Herod for being Herod, we would do well to imagine just how much about Herod we tend to be. How much of Herod we act out. How much of Herod we live out in our own leadership.”³

We don’t want to admit it, but so often we’re also prone to casting people as villain or hero,
Seeing everything – especially our political world – as a battle between winners and losers.
We may not have the power that Herod had,
So we might not be given the chance to make some of the same decisions he made,
But how often are we threatened when someone else does better than us?
We’re competitive, and seek, in subtle ways – of course – to work around our competition.

As preacher Karoline Lewis said:
“What an appropriate Epiphany text.”⁴
Epiphany means to reveal or to show.

¹ https://www.biblegateway.com/blog/2017/12/who-was-herod/ and https://www.britannica.com/biography/Herod-king-of-Judaea
³ Ibid.
⁴ Ibid.
And this is a “story that reveals our Messiah, our Savior, as one whose very presence is a kind of power that the powerful hate. A story that exposes our innate response to that which and those who might challenge our established and wished for power.”

When we view Herod this way, the role of the magi becomes more complex too. They weren’t simply adventurers following a star. “They were resisters.”

They’d been traveling towards Jesus and stopped in Jerusalem to ask for help. That’s where they found the fearful King Herod. He wanted to use them to get information, And they resisted him.

They continued on their journey to Jesus, And then they returned home “by another way” (Matthew 2:12), Avoiding a return to Herod, who was waiting for news from their journey.

Given this, we may be even more tempted to cast ourselves as the wise men – the resisters.

But this text invites us to wonder who we really are in the nitty-gritty, mundane living of our lives:
Do we act out of fear?
Are we competitive and worried there isn’t enough to go around?
Do we see people as winners or losers?
And are we acting more like Herod than we’d hoped?

Or are we more like those astrologers from the East?
Taking risks,
Following leads that might not go anywhere,
Searching for truth and meaning,
And offering our very best when we find it.

I suspect that for many of us, the truth is that we’re a little bit of each character in this story.
Some days we’re more like Herod, although we’d never admit it,
Some days we embody the courageous witness of the magi, and then we’re at our best.

All of these qualities in our story today are set against the backdrop of Jesus’ birth. His birth revealed everyone in his or her truest state:
Herod, responding with fear,
The magi, responding with surprising courage,
And Mary and Joseph, in the haze of being new parents, Invited strangers into their home to see their child.

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5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
Christ reveals himself to us again this Epiphany,
And in doing so, we find more about ourselves revealed as well.

As we find ourselves in this ancient story, we’re left with the question of what qualities and characters will we live into this year?
Will we retreat into our bunkers of fear, taking sides?
Or, will we venture out, taking with us the gifts only we fully know and possess,
Following a star,
And finding Jesus again?