

Scripture and Sermon for January 8, 2017

Isaiah 60:1-6

Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.
For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the Lord will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.
Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.
Lift up your eyes and look around;
they all gather together, they come to you;
your sons shall come from far away,
and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.
Then you shall see and be radiant;
your heart shall thrill and rejoice,
because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you,
the wealth of the nations shall come to you.
A multitude of camels shall cover you,
the young camels of Midian and Ephah;
all those from Sheba shall come.
They shall bring gold and frankincense,
and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

Matthew 2:1-12

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

'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.'"

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 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." 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. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 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. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Let us pray....Amen.

History describes King Herod as a paranoid and ruthless leader, as one who used secret police and foreign spies to maintain order and discipline among his subjects.

His building projects were unique for their scope and size: many of his buildings were dedicated to Roman leaders, with the hope that it would curry favor. In spite of his obvious bribes, Herod was not trusted by the Roman elite, and was limited by the Emperor in his dealings with other kingdoms.

His family converted to Judaism when he was very young, and there are reports that he was ashamed of his Gentile roots. His role as King of the Jewish people put him in the unique position of being loyal to the Emperor while at the same time leading a people who followed and obeyed the One Creator God.

The birth of the Messiah, the anointed one, the one foretold by the prophets, represented a significant threat to Herod. It would have been enough to have the people he ruled be excited about the coming Messiah, but when foreign dignitaries, studious academics in science and astronomy, the ones we know as the wise men, or three kings, showed up asking about the newborn King, well that was just too much for Herod.

In a perfect storm of insecurity, paranoia, and self-preservation, Herod plotted to get the wise men to tell him where the baby was, ostensibly so

that he could bow down and pay his respects. But in reality, Herod planned on killing the baby, thus preventing Jesus from ever serving as King.

So while Herod thinks that the newborn baby will be a king as the world has come to know kings, we now know that the Messiah was nothing like a worldly king. The wise men were warned in a dream about Herod's plans, and they did not return to Herod with a report. They offered their gifts of gold, myrrh and frankincense, and expressed their joy at having found the newborn king.

It can't be emphasized enough that foreign dignitaries, Gentiles, non-Jews were the first worldly people to discover the baby Jesus. The implications for the Messiah's ministry are huge: Jesus spent much of his ministry healing and helping Gentiles. So much so, that it became a problem for the Pharisees and scribes who were leaders of the church.

Leave it to Herod to be threatened by the presence of a baby. Just the idea of one who might grow up to replace him was enough to get him worried. Very worried.

Once he realized that the wise men weren't coming back, Herod decided to make sure that all the newborn baby boys in the region were killed. But Joseph had already been warned in a dream, and had moved his family to Egypt, where they would stay until it was safe to return.

The most powerful leader in the region, and Herod was thwarted by the dreams had by the wise men and Joseph.

The worldly was defeated by the sacred. Herod never saw it coming.

His faith was one of convenience. His posturing at the temple wasn't a true faith, but one that was used to further his kingdom over his people. Herod wasn't a believer, he was a faker, for the only one he worshiped was himself.

Even the wise men, believers in other faiths, were more faithful than Herod. They believed in their dream, acted on it, and prevented Herod from doing harm to Jesus and his family.

So where are we in this story? What role do we, as modern followers of Christ play in the continuing story of Jesus?

Can we relate to the wise men? Ignorant of the Messiah, but overjoyed at his discovery? Can we relate to Herod? Afraid of change, threatened by what the future may bring? Can we relate to the Holy Family? Following their faith, but unsure of where it will lead them?

The complicated answer is that if we are honest, we will relate to all of them, on some level.

No matter where we are on our faith journey, some part of our spirit hasn't yet discovered the Christ child. Or, we discover our Lord and Savior at different times in our lives, only to drift, or forget it's importance.

Is there some fear in us over the future of the church? Over the future of our souls? Over the future of the world? Are we afraid of what changes may come that will disrupt the way we know our lives, the way we like our lives? Of course. But we aren't so paranoid, or ruthless as to try and sabotage that future. At least some part of us can understand why Herod was so afraid: it's in our nature to want things to stay the same, to stay

comfortable....

As we grow in our faith formation, we learn to discern the path that is put before us. For those who invest in that type of spiritual direction, the joy is in discovering new paths in which to follow Jesus. Is there certainty? No.

Is there proof? No. Are there guarantees? Nope. But the path is put before us nonetheless.

Wise people, fearful of the changes to come, faithful followers on the sacred path...that's all of us, in some way or another.

What gifts will we bring? What will we do to try and secure a future that serves us? What path will we take on our faith journeys?

Each of us came here today with a little joy over the news of the newborn king, with a little fear over what that will mean for our lives, and with a little inkling about what our path will lead us to. In that way, we are the wise, we are Herod, and we are the Holy Family.

And as we grow in faith, I suspect there will be much less Herod, and much more wisdom, with a much clearer path for our journey.

These are the fruits of our worshiping together. These are the benefits of our praying together. These are the gifts of our singing together.

The Gifts of the Advent Season, Hope, Peace, Love, and Joy, all represented by Christ, are the gifts we carry with us all year long when we worship, and pray, and sing as one body. And even though we will put our Advent Wreath away until next year, the flames of each of the candles will burn within us as we live out our faith.

May their light guide you on your faith journey in the coming new year.
Amen.