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Epiphany of Our Lord

January 8, 2017

“In the Days of Herod the King”

(Matthew 2:1-2)

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“Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, ‘Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him’ (Matthew 2:1-2).

Collect of the Day: Father in heaven, at the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River You proclaimed Him Your beloved son and anointed Him with the Holy Spirit. Make all who are baptized in His name faithful in their calling as Your children and inheritors with Him of everlasting life; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

“In the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men . . . came to Jerusalem”. In the days of Herod. Why would Matthew bother with that piece of information? It gives us a timeline, for sure, but I think it’s also to tell us there’s trouble ahead, immediate trouble for Jesus as a baby, and trouble later on for Jesus as a man. To put it another way, the cutthroat politics that led to the crucifixion of Jesus are already very much present at his birth.

To understand these cutthroat politics, we need only remember who this King Herod was. His reign began in 47 B.C. He was known as Herod the Great, and in many ways he earned the title. He was a great builder. Still today you can see remnants of his mammoth harbor in Caesarea and a number of formidable fortresses. He brought Roman entertainment to Judea, building theaters and amphitheaters. He could even be generous, dramatically cutting taxes to make things easier for the people in the famine of 25 BC.

But historians say Herod had a terrible flaw to his character which would forever tarnish his reputation. He was paranoid, and in his later years, this paranoia drove him practically insane. For example, he executed his favorite wife and her mother. He also had his brother-in-law whacked, and an uncle. He murdered three of his own sons (Antipater, Alexander and Aristobulus) because he thought they were ambitious for his crown. On hearing of it, the Roman emperor, Augustus, joked that it’s safer to be one of Herod’s pigs than one of his sons.

When King Herod was on his deathbed, he figured the Israelites would be so glad to be rid of him that they would throw a big party just to spite him. Herod was

enraged at the very idea. So he left a standing order that on the day of his death, some of the most distinguished citizens of the country should be arrested on trumped up charges and taken (along with other political prisoners) to the great hippodrome at Jericho, an oval shaped stadium used for horse and chariot races. There, archers were to circle around and massacre the lot of them. Why? When he died, Herod wanted there to be mourning in the streets rather than dancing. (On a side note, the order was never carried out.)

But that's Herod the Great. He was a sick, suspicious, scheming, paranoid wreck of a man, whose MO was to destroy anyone who might be a threat to his power. Matthew wants to be sure we know this is the political and historical context into which Jesus was born. What we read of Herod in Matthew 2 is very consistent with what we know of Herod from the historians.

In our lesson, magi are coming in from the east. Magi were part of a priestly caste of astronomers and scholars. They are not kings, but were often close to kings and served as trusted consultants. The magi have seen something happening in the night sky (either a natural phenomenon or miraculous) that leads them to believe a new king has been born in Judah. So, quite naturally, they go to the capital city of Judah, Jerusalem, and start poking around. "Where is he who is born King of the Jews". Word of their search reaches Herod, who, of course, is thinking, "I'm the king around these parts." To Herod's ears, their question sounds like, "Where's the new born king, you has been?" Matthew articulates the shockwaves: "When King Herod heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him." Jerusalem knows that whenever Herod is troubled by something, people die.

Herod learns from the religious scholars that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem. And it also becomes clear the magi were not going to come back to inform him. So, following his normal way of doing business, Herod responds by doing whatever is necessary to protect his power. He orders all boys two years old and younger who

lived in or around Bethlehem to be killed. It isn't hard really. He's already killed his own sons for the same reason. Killing a few other babies would be easy. He probably thinks to himself, "They can conceive more."

Archaeologies say there would have been no more than a thousand inhabitants in Bethlehem at the time, and probably less. If there were a thousand, that means there would have been about 20-25 children two years or younger. Half of them are female. So roughly twelve little boys were murdered by Herod's soldiers. We must not exaggerate the number, but a smaller number makes the act no less heinous.

So the authorities took a shot at Jesus' life, already as an infant. It failed, but they would try again. Matthew wants us to remember there are links between Advent and Lent, between Christmas and Good Friday, between the manger and the cross. These are all part of the same storyline, and to try to divorce Christmas from Good Friday is to miss the point entirely.

The young boys of Bethlehem died, but Jesus escapes. He escapes death at the hands of Herod, that later He might die on the cross for all sinners, even ones so cruel as Herod, or so young as those infants and toddlers in Bethlehem. Jesus sacrificed his innocent life to redeem all people from sin and death and the devil.

We too live in the days of Herod the king. That is, we still live in the days when nations and individuals that feel threatened will lash out in violence in order to hold on to what power they have. This is true of national leaders, such as Erdogan in Turkey, Assad in Syria, Putin in Russia, Kim Jong-un in North Korea and many others. It's true of gang members in Milwaukee. It's true of you and me. When threatened, we lash out if only with our tongues, or texts or tweets or thoughts. We are still in the days of Herod the king, when all is not well, all is not quiet and peaceful. There's the tension of threat in the air 2000 years ago and still today.

Perhaps this is why Matthew wrote the story the way he did. God comes to us not just in the good times, but

especially in the bad: in the midst of our anxiety, our fear, our loneliness. He comes to us and abides with us in the worst of places, the most dangerous of times, in the most painful circumstances, and shares in the suffering, shares in the tragedy and the sorrow.

The message of Christmas, the message of Immanuel, “God with us” is not “I have come to save you from suffering and pain,” but rather, “Lo, I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” I am with you always, “God with us” always, even in the days of King Herod, and I will be with you always until those days are finally over.”

How many millions of refugees are on the move today, fleeing a merciless tyrant or regime or caliphate. Joseph and Mary and Jesus were refugees once, running for their lives, fleeing a merciless tyrant, becoming foreigners in a foreign land. It’s all part of “God with us”, whoever we are.

Think of it this way: If Jesus had not been born into the days of Herod, into times of threat and anxiety, then his name Immanuel, “God with us”, would ring hollow. But from experience, Jesus understands what it’s like. And he promises, “Lo, I am with you always”, no matter what, even if it takes him all the way to a cross.

That almighty God should do that for us, that he should become one of us and out of love die for us, how do we respond to that kind of grace? The magi give us an example. Verse 11: “they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.” Interesting enough, we don’t know what the Magi might have said to Joseph or Mary or Jesus. Matthew doesn’t quote them. He didn’t have to. The magi were saying it all with their worship and their generosity.

Keep in mind there were still more questions than answers surrounding this infant, who he was, what he would do. No one had it all sorted out, not the magi or the shepherds or even his parents. But all who saw what the wise men were doing knew well where they stood. They

were laying their money on Jesus. Jesus once said, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Lk. 12:34). The magi were putting their treasure where their hearts already were.

Good Shepherd is already half way through our Ignited initiative. Over the next couple of weeks you’ll hear more about how it’s going, and on the 21st and 22nd of this month you will have opportunity to get on board, if you haven’t already, or to renew your commitment, or to change it if you want. Suffice it to say it’s all good. We’re right on target. We’re meeting our goals, doing things we couldn’t afford to do before. We’re having an impact on the lives of people in our church, in our school, in our community. Along the way, we’ve paid off short term debt and have made repairs and improvements to our facilities. But we want to finish strong. Just like in a football game, when the home team is winning, you don’t want to see them throttle back. Nor do we ever want to throttle back or relax when it comes to generosity toward our Lord. Why? Because he has been so generous to us. His grace and generosity demands our best.

So if there’s reason in your life to thank and praise the Lord, (which there is) then, by all means, thank and praise him joyfully like the magi did, but not just with your lips. Not just with your lips. Like the magi, also with your treasure. “Gotta have skin in the game.”

The magi didn’t have it all sorted out, but it’s clear their hope and joy was not in the gold. It was in the baby in front of them. Somehow they knew that little one came from God and was of God, and that it was their delight to love him with all their heart and with all their soul and with all their strength and with all their mind (Lk. 10:27). . . to love him with everything they had, including their treasure. And can’t you see how God used them and their treasure for the sake of his kingdom. Surely their gifts became very useful as the holy family fled to Egypt. So also God uses our treasure for the sake of his kingdom.

But back to the main point: we are not alone in these

days of Herod the king. We are not alone when facing him or any other threat such as sin or death or the devil. For in Christ Jesus, God is with us, on our side, in our corner, in our place on the cross. It's all part of the same storyline between the manger and the cross. Thanks be to God. Amen.

