



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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JANUARY 4, 2015
EPIPHANY SUNDAY
CHRISTMAS REFLECTIONS

Reflections of Authority: Herod and the Magi Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

Holding an infant in your arms, it is difficult to imagine how anyone could be afraid of her. Granted we may be anxious about what to do if the baby starts crying or even worry that we might drop the child. Those are normal worries, but not fears. We are not afraid of babies.

Yet, Matthew tells us that Herod was frightened, “and Jerusalem with him,” when the magi arrived looking for a child born to be the king of the Jews. To Herod’s credit, he quickly assembled the chief priests and scribes to determine where and when this child had been born. They reached back to the prophet Micah (5:2) to mark the birthplace as Bethlehem and calculated from the sighting of the star that the child was two years old or slightly younger. I think we can all understand the fears associated with dealing with a two-year old!

Nevertheless, the reactions of Herod and the magi could not be more different. These exotic travelers are sincere in their search. Theories abound about their origins, but whether you consider them astrologers, kings, or scholars, they had been studying, figuring, thinking, and traveling for a long time to find this baby king.

They arrive in Bethlehem with eagerness, enthusiasm, and some measure of fidelity although they know little to nothing about this child or the kingdom he will rule. They bring gifts, expensive gifts, that represent wealth (gold) and royalty (frankincense) and also prelude Jesus’ death (myrrh). We do not know exactly where they are from or whom they represent, but we do know they are not afraid of this child as is Herod. They are enthralled, excited, and eager to meet this baby.

Herod, on the other hand, cannot see a baby much less the long-awaited Messiah for which the Jewish people had hoped. Herod was a powerful man who made things happen. He built many of the grand buildings in Jerusalem. He ruled with power, doing whatever was necessary to maintain control in this pesky little kingdom his father, with the blessing of Caesar, had given him to rule. Power hoisted upon fear—fear that he could

easily create among the Jewish people—was the foundation of his reign. He had no time for a theory that a child born in the poor little village of Bethlehem would one day take his throne from him. Eradicate the threat and move on was his mode of operation. Fear has no patience, so Herod ordered all the male babies under two years of age to be killed.

Perhaps Herod had good reason to be afraid. Perhaps he had heard other prophecies about this child, words that we have heard over and over in recent weeks:

For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

Isaiah 9:6-7

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

Isaiah 11:1-5

Or that passage we heard earlier which suggests that Herod and other rulers like him might have to bow down to the new king:

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.

Isaiah 60:1-3

Perhaps Herod had good reason to be afraid because this baby was a threat to him and to all who rule with unbridled power. If had Herod taken the time to study the ancient texts as had the magi, he would have discovered frightening passages about overturning authority, leveling the playing field between the poor and the rich, the powerful and the weak, shaking up the powers that be and finally setting the kingdom of God right side up.

Herod had reason to be afraid because everything Jesus had come to do was targeted at him and those like him. The ones he had come to help and to heal were the ones Herod despised and mistreated. He had come to offer true riches like dignity, respect, understanding, and compassion. He would rule with honest power like grace and love. And he would offer life beyond death, a gift no tyrant could offer or take away.

Many of us are ready for the celebration of Christmas to be over. The decorating, the shopping, the preparing, and the partying can be exhausting. This afternoon the Chrismon Tree will be put away, the wreaths will come down, the Creche will be stored away, and the trappings of the season will be gone. But Christmas will not be over. The story of Herod and the magi reminds us that no frightened ruler can put an end to Christmas nor can we. If we reflect on all that Christmas is and will be, like the magi, we will look for the Christ Child with worshipful hearts. Like the magi, we will give the most precious gifts we have. Like the magi, we will rejoice. And, like Herod, we will recognize that Christmas will raise its tiny little finger whenever and wherever justice is needed and love is requested and mercy is the order of the day. Herod came up short when he reflected on the birth of Jesus. He thought all it would take would be the elimination of a some babies. He failed to realize that he was dealing with a Savior who was born not only in Bethlehem but in our hearts as well. Thank God he is! Amen.

January 4, 2015

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Even at the dawn of a new year, the dark news of tragedy and hardship threatens to overshadow us, O God. Then the prophet's voice breaks through the cloud of gloom and doom reminding us that an everlasting light has shined, the eternal sun has risen dispelling the darkness and establishing hope for all generations. It is toward this light that we turn our faces, O God, and bask in the warmth of love that has come in Jesus the Christ. Once again we offer our gratitude for your generous gift of life. Praise be to you, O God, for your abundant grace.

While we know that crossing the threshold from one year to another will not magically change the realities of our world, we do recognize that a new year offers opportunities for fresh attitudes and renewed energy. We do pray for a better year, one which finds less violence, improved health, broader prosperity, and reduced rancor. We pray that problems which seemed insurmountable a few weeks ago will gain clarity in the days ahead. We pray that relationships that are strained will begin to mend. We pray that health issues will improve, that working conditions will change for the good, that good jobs will become more plentiful, and that relationships with one another will flourish. We pray that racial tensions will give way to greater understanding between people, that old prejudices will die away, that ancient feuds will cease. We pray that our presumed hatreds will evaporate and our openness to one another will expand. We pray that the dreams you have for us will be realized in this year, O God.

As the light of this day shines upon us, warm our hearts with your love and open our eyes to the wonder of all your creation. As the light of Christ rises within us, enable us to illumine the dark corners of life that we encounter. As your light fills our lives, grant us all your peace, we pray, in the name of Christ, the true Light of the World. Amen.