

Herod's Part **Matthew 2:1-12 (13-21)**
Epiphany Sunday (January 3) 2016
St. Marks United Methodist Church, Charleston, WV

(Matthew 2:1-21 ESV) ¹Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, ²saying, "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."³ When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:
⁶"And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel."
⁷Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. ⁸And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him."⁹ After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. ¹¹And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. ¹²And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

Janet read to you the lectionary text, appointed for today, which is the "gold foil Christmas Card version" with which we are familiar. However, if she had kept on reading a few more verses, she would have told you "the rest of the story" – the part that we don't like to hear at Christmas, or The Twelve Days of Christmas, or Epiphany.

It's the mean, ugly, horrific part of the Christmas story. It goes like this, beginning, verse 13:

{13} Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." {14} Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, {15} and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son." {16} When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. {17} Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: {18} "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more." {19} When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, {20} "Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead." {21} Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel.

A colleague in ministry shared a story of one of his first little churches, early in his ministry. All of the churches in the little town had combined to do a Christmas Eve worship, because they were all so small. Shortly after the first hymn, one of the regulars – whose name I think he said was Andy – had his pager go off. Andy was a member of the local fire department and his “beeped exits” from church were not all that uncommon. He quickly ducked out.

As the worship progressed through the carols and scripture reading, Andy came popping back in for just a moment and said that it was the home of a church member's mother, that was fully engulfed in the fire. Everyone in that family, and the rest of Andy's family immediately got up and left. Over the next few moments, it became increasingly obvious that everyone there was wrestling with a very

hard dilemma – stay and listen to another Christmas Eve sermon or get up and leave so as to either help, or to see a really big fire. The pastor said that by the time he had gotten into the second page of his sermon manuscript, the only people left in the congregation were the ones who were going to be picked up after worship by someone else, and those who had already nodded off to sleep, and were undisturbed by the news of the conflagration.

“Christmas just isn’t supposed to be like that!” he concluded.

But that’s how the first Christmas was – hard, occurring in a sinful, politically charged world, where people do things that are bad and nasty.

The first Christmas happened in a world, in a middle East, not much different that today’s.

In Luke’s Gospel – the story that we read on Christmas Eve, we hear:

¹ In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled.² This was the first enrollment, when Quirin’i-us was governor of Syria. (Luke 2:1-2)

The story of Christmas, of God becoming human, is not the story of a Watchmaker God. In that notion of God, He makes creation, flings it out there, and then sits back to watch it unfold. God does not get involved. Set some rules, made some guidelines, and then sits back and lets it all unfold. Such a “watchmaker God” is not the God of Christians, who believe that God actually got involved in history.

When God became a human, and walked amongst us to show us what the prototype is supposed to look like – “made in the image of God” – it was when Augustus was emperor of the Roman empire

and when Quirinius was the Governor of Syria. It was God involved in history – not as an abstract set of rules or ideas. Not some platonic Greek philosophy. But, God involved in history.

Involved in history when a paranoid, if not paranoid Schizophrenic (based on what we know from history,) was sitting in a seat of power.

The popular parable of the day (attributed to have come from the lips of Caesar Augustus, himself) is that it was safer to be one of Herod's pigs than one of his family. (Being a good "Jew-in-form" Herod would not ever eat of the meat of the pig, but his paranoia did lead him to kill his wife and three of his sons.) One historian says that Herod left a standing order – thankfully, not followed – that on the day of his death, the soldiers were to kill the eldest child of every home in Jerusalem – just so that everyone would be in mourning on the day of his death.

As the "rest of the story" tells us, his paranoia – at what he heard from the Persian magi – led him to kill all of the male children under the age of two in the Bethlehem area.

This kind of terrorism sounds much like the terrorism being bred in the Middle East today. In fact, it was only by Joseph, Mary, and Jesus becoming refugees from there to Egypt that the Plan of God for the salvation of the world was able to be accomplished.

Christmas – the Emmanuel "God with us" – happens in the midst of the Herod times, in the midst of reality, historically and in the present. Not in the sanitary straw of a church courtyard stable. Not in the gold foil Christmas card of three wise men coming on camels.

God comes to us in the midst of reality. Born in the middle of terror. Dying in the middle of terror.

This is God.

[Pause] Think about that [Pause]

Much like today. [Pause.]

Much like today.

In her favorite of all my sermons ever preached over the past 12-1/2 years, Mona Nunley (even after her debilitating stroke) talks about my “manure sermon” (preached on September 7, 2003!) – I discussed Anne Lamott’s notion of how to handle manure in our lives. There are three ways, she says: (1) we can wallow in it. {I am afraid of what is going on in the world. I am afraid. I am afraid. I will do whatever I think will make me safe.

(2) We can fling the manure: we strike out with our sorrow, our fear, and we hit whoever we can to make us feel safer, to make us feel relieved; to make us share the manure/suffering we feel – on somebody else

(3) We can accept that God is allowing some manure in the world to occupy us, to distract us, from something special that God is about.

We are living in a Herod-esque time, with what is going on with Syria, with ISIS, with an American culture that seems to be 99% obsessed with F E A R.

I don’t know. I’m pretty sure that God is not causing this to happen. But I do have a notion that God is allowing the American preoccupation with F E A R to keep us so occupied as to allow God to be doing a new thing, something special.

I got a hint of it in a Facebook post that I got from Mike Ditchen. It was about a bunch of orthodox Jewish rabbis, who had met and decided that Jesus had done more for the elevation of the Torah than any rabbi in the past two millennia. They were deciding that instead of

calling Jesus a heretic, they needed to look seriously at what He taught.

I asked my friend the rabbi, if this story is legitimate, and he told me that he has been preaching this for years; that he personally knew some of these rabbis, and that this is the “real deal.”

God is in the midst of doing something, and he doesn't want the masses to get scared and try to interfere, methinks.

In the midst of all the terror going on in the world – in the midst of the insanity that rivals what Herod was doing – God is still the God of incarnation – the God of involvement in human history.

So, I'm going to let people rail about the F E A R, about building a wall, about all kinds of stuff ... and I'm going to sit back and watch as God is doing His thing – once more. Once again. God is with us.

The celebration of Epiphany is one of a New Light in the world. But, sometimes, that New Light comes in undercover, like magi who slipped out of town, from a crazy king, under the cover of darkness, by a different road.

I invite you to join me in looking for God to do a new thing in 2016 – going down a different road. While most of the people are gnashing their teeth in fear.

As a wise man once said: The **road of condemnation and criticism** is easily trod. **Actually doing it better** is the way better taken.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
AMEN.