

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Today's gospel is an all-too-common story. It's a story that we read each Epiphany. And the story begins with the phrase "in the time of King Herod." This phrase sets the tone for what is to come. It's revealing to us what the world looks like at Jesus's birth.

After we set the backdrop, it continues with a group of magi. These magi were likely educated, foreign, astrologists who were religious leaders in Zoroastrianism¹ and who came from present-day countries like Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, India, and Ethiopia. Christian tradition holds that the three magi who presented the gifts were named Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar. And they were understood to represent the Gentile world in all its racial diversity. But, remember, when these magi arrived, it was "in the time of King Herod" and that will change everything.

Most people don't see infants as a threat, but for Herod things were different. You see, Herod was nothing less than a cruel, oppressive ruler. He was an insecure, unstable, and paranoid leader. He would quickly lash out with violence against anyone who threatened his power. Historians tell us that he killed several of his children under the suspicion that they were plotting against him. And, when Herod's death was imminent,

¹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4305

he had a bunch of men executed to ensure there would be grieving, even if it wasn't for him. // So, for Matthew's author to start this all off with the phrase "in the time of King Herod," we're talking about power.

And so, when the magi arrive and ask about a *new* king in verse 3, King Herod was overcome by his insecurity. And, what the people around Herod knew is that when Herod became insecure things were going to fall apart, and that is why the whole of Jerusalem became frightened too. I can only begin to imagine what his advisors were thinking. Clearly, someone defected and passed along a message to the magi because, in verse 12, we heard that the magi snuck home a different way. Had we kept reading in chapter 2, we would hear that Joseph was also warned to flee to another country as a refugee with infant Jesus to avoid political persecution. Once King Herod learned he was tricked by the magi, his anger flared and he ordered the slaughter of all children two years and younger. In that moment, Herod spoke a few words and destruction took hold in and around Bethlehem. Parents sobbed. Blood spilled. And, I can't help but imagine that countless people who were told to kill the children questioned the action, but out of fear of Herod, they became the conduit for destruction. This is the story we recall each Epiphany Sunday, and it's a story that happens over-and-over again.

Just this last week, we saw a modern-day example at the capitol. We saw those on the brink of losing power willing to do anything to keep it. We saw the words of those in

power turn into destruction. We saw violence as the currency of choice. It was disgusting, horrific, and inexcusable. The violent mob and the inciting words from the president have led to a tipping point that has crossed from partisanship into an attack against our country, our democracy, and what it means for Christians to participate responsibly in society. Leaders have condemned the domestic terror attack and have called for the immediate resignation or removal of President Trump. So too, the Presiding Bishop of our denomination called for President Trump's resignation in a letter with other members of the National Council of Churches including the leaders of the United Church of Christ, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, Disciples of Christ, Alliance of Baptists, the United Methodist Church, Reformed Church in America, the Ecumenical Catholic Communion, and the Presbyterian Church (USA).² While Christian flags were waved and banners displayed the name of Jesus, the president's incitement and the actions of the mob are nothing less than antithetical to our Christian faith.

And, while many people say things like "that was not America," we know that is not true. The sad but sobering truth is that what we saw on Wednesday *is* America and *it is* American. From the very beginning of this country, we have used violence to take what we wanted from the native peoples. When we didn't like the outcome or we felt threatened by another, we violently attacked the other. And this last week we, again, saw our reality. We saw the truth that from the beginning of this country we've allowed

² <https://nationalcouncilofchurches.us/open-letter-to-vice-president-pence-members-of-congress-and-the-cabinet-calling-for-the-removal-of-president-trump-from-office/>

an unholy amalgamation of white supremacy, racism, and Christianity to plague our nation from the very beginning.³

You see, our own bishop here in Metro Chicago Synod released a statement pointing out what so many had seen—namely that the way that law enforcement responded to the almost entirely white mob was dramatically different than the protests with BIPOC this last summer. Police took selfies with those breaking into the capitol. Barricades to protect were absent or moved aside. The use of force was reserved or absent. These images were, as Bishop Curry puts it, “forcing [people of color] to relive those moments of pain and oppression, again and again.” We watched as a noose hung outside the capitol building, as black individuals cleaned up the destruction of white folks, and as white people returned from their destructive rage with both their lives and their freedom. These are the images that are all too real—images that we’ve seen as white people get different treatment from BIPOC. We’ve witnessed it from George Floyd, to Martin Luther King Jr., to Harriet Tubman, to Fredrick Douglas, to Sojourner Truth, and so many others. This *is* America. This *is* Herod’s world. This *is* the nature of humankind.

And because this is so prototypically human, that’s why we find it here at the beginning of Matthew’s gospel. You see, God is tired of this crap. So, right up front it must be named, we need to see it, and we need to hear it. Looking away does us no good.

³ https://religionnews.com/2021/01/07/taking-the-white-christian-nationalist-symbols-at-the-capitol-riot-seriously/?fbclid=IwAR1NvgQ_j70ykjmdnLvJCT0_M5IdAD1o1mV-H3-H2G1kEcl3FfcwWSj6fck

Pretending it doesn't exist gets us nowhere. First, we need to name that "this *is* America," and then we can say "but this is not how America should be" and that "it is not God's world." Instead, the gospel shows us that God's world stands up to evil and rejects violence in all its form. God's world rejects the pride of self along with the privilege that comes from education, place of birth, or skin pigmentation. God's world is one that is based on acts of service and love. And anyone who says anything different is nothing but a wolf in sheep's clothing.

That is why we gather here in this place each week. It's not because I'm perfect or because we've got it all right, but rather that we all have the tendency to take all of God's good gifts and turn them inward. And when that happens, we are called to name it, we are invited to own it, and we are encouraged to reconcile and amend our wrongs.

For today's readings remind us that we worship a God who draws together all of creation from every corner of the earth. Our God reveals a vision for our world that brings life for all people. And, you and I, we, become actors in God's vision. We are strengthened by God's meal so that we might strive for service, love, and justice. And, together as a community, we journey like the magi to come to better know our God this year, to catch glimpses of God's vision, and together, to cultivate a world where God's love reigns supreme. Amen.