

“A Tricky Move” 1-1-17

Isaiah 63:7-9

Matthew 2:13-23

I have always experienced life as a bumpy ride. Moments of joy become eclipsed by times of loss. Every day brings incredible joy to many and to as many on the same day the challenge of loss or tragedy. King David, reflects upon a difficult period of his life pleads with God to “Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress; my eye wastes away from grief, my soul and body also...my strength fails because of my misery”. He then turns in faith to the Lord in the same moment, affirming, “But I trust in you, O Lord; I say, ‘You are my God.’ My times are in your hand: deliver me...” (Psalm 31:6-15).

Perhaps these polarities have defined your life over the past year. We do not know what lies ahead in this New Year, but we are certain on the road ahead there will be joys and blessings mingled with the off ramps of disappointment and loss.

Matthew and Luke have just taken us through the announcement and joy of Christ’s birth. We have praised God with the heavenly host proclaiming, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors” (Luke 2:14).

However, something lurks underneath the surface. Matthew introduces to us a piece of the Christmas story that unsettles us. From Matthew’s rendering of the story almost immediately an angel appears to Joseph in a dream, saying, “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”. I think of the many refugees in our world running from the wrath of Herod, many in our church and community, who do so only because they can cross a border.

Earlier Wise Men had inquired of Herod as to the nature and place of birth of the child. All of the Jewish scholars are brought in and tell Herod and the Wise Men that the Messiah is to be born “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’” (Matthew 2:1-6).

Herod is a brutal and crafty politician. Upon assuming power Herod annihilates the Sanhedrin and slaughters three hundred court officers out of hand. He later has his wife Mariamne, her mother Alexandra, his eldest son Anipater, and two other sons, Alexander and Aristobulus murdered. Beware the paranoid self-consumed leader. Yet there he is in the salvation narrative.

In his paranoid pretentiousness Herod fawns interest in the birth of this Messiah identified by the Jewish biblical scholars. He tells the Wise Men, “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” (Matthew 2:7-12).

One thinks of Thomas Hardy’s comment describing one of his characters in “A Pair of Blue Eyes”; “He only knew the ethics of the deed was shaded with the subtleness of villainy”.

Another dream displaying the counter move of God within this drama sends the unsuspecting Wise Men not back to Herod but home by another road toward their home country.

Herod, now aware that he has been tricked, is infuriated and orders the slaughter of the innocents. Bethlehem is small and it is said that the number of children there would not exceed thirty babies at the time (Barclay, 'Matthew', p.28). This inexplicable event lies within the mystery of God's sovereign grace amidst the salvation narrative.

We know human nature is capable of such atrocities. There were six million Jews in the Holocaust between 1941-45 ordered killed by Hitler and the Nazi regime. From 1917-1953 thirty million dead in the Soviet Union, ordered by another paranoid leader, Stalin and his secret police, through purges and people being sent to the Gulag. The Rwandan genocide of 1994 ordered by Hutus killed 500,000, mostly women and children. History is replete with examples of the vindictive Herodian spirit.

Why does Evil hate the Good? What people will do to eliminate Jesus Christ and his Spirit living in his followers is well documented. If a person is set on his or her own way and sees in Christ someone who would challenge, threaten and interfere with his or her ambitions in rebuke and judgment, the evil desire within rises to seek ways to eliminate Christ. The light of Christ exposes the dark works of evil. There is in this world a profoundly active anti-Christ spirit, often overt, but more often covert. We may become its agents without any awareness of its presence. The Apostle Peter found that out as he rebuked Jesus for saying that it was not right that he should go to Jerusalem and die. That is how powerfully subtle evil can be. So Hugh Walpole writes, "If you are uncertain of which two paths to take, choose the one on which the shadow of the cross falls" (Guide to Prayer, p.43).

No wonder Paul tells us to "Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup" (1 Corinthians 11:28). We allow the light of Christ to reveal the darkness and confession needed within the soul to be properly aligned with God's Spirit. We may be misaligned and not know it.

Matthew underscores the problem of evil which we have great difficulty getting our head around. Why does God allow evil the apparent upper hand and a place within the goodness of the world God creates? Or so it would seem.

Maybe Herod is important to this story because he reminds us of the nature of the world we live in and why we need a Savior. We witness Syrian refugees, swelling the populations of Europe, many Christians and members of some of the oldest churches in our world. There are people afflicted by poverty in this country and on our streets without shelter. I am grateful that our church will be a nighttime sanctuary five days a week January -March for some of these folks, reflecting Christ's compassion. We do know that the world as it is does not reflect what God would have it to be. And so we pray, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven".

One person put it this way; "Jesus didn't come into the world to bring us a mid-winter festival of peace and contentment. He wasn't born into a placid Christmas card scene, but rather into the sort of world where families wander homeless and corrupt leaders rule by murder and deceit...Jesus didn't come to offer respite from the world...He came to save it" (Homiletics, Jan.-Feb. , p. 10).

As we enter this New Year the presence of Herod within the salvation story reminds us of the mission that Christ gives us. Every one of us here this morning live in a world “where tyrants still rule and we have real economic, spiritual, emotional, physical and relational troubles”. So how does God call us to live and find hope in such a world? (Homiletics, p.11).

Matthew affirms that God is still sovereign in this story of redemption. Another dream from God to Joseph allows the return of the Holy Family to Israel. “Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who are seeking the child’s life are dead”. A subsequent dream sends him away from the rule of Archelaus, Herod’s evil son, who is ruling over Judea, to Galilee and the town of Nazareth, where Jesus grows up.

Matthew is telling us that we bring hope into a dark world not by attacking the evils we see directly, but following the guidance of God’s Spirit. Writer Joyce Hollyday tells of her visit to South Africa in 1988. She found a country torn by violence and in a state of emergency. Thousands of antiapartheid activists are in prison or exile. No one had hope the situation would change.

She witnesses the hope Christ and the church can bring through the actions of Archbishop Desmond Tutu. In a packed cathedral surrounded by riot police Tutu called his enemies “God’s children too” whose “whose humanity is caught up in our humanity”. Addressing the defenders of apartheid that day he proclaims the promise and hope of the gospel: “You have already lost! Come and join the winning side”.

It was within six years that a freed Nelson Mandela became South Africa’s first black president. Three years later Hollyday observes through the process of the truth and reconciliation commission a stunning reversal of things. She writes, “Let us not forget: Miracles happen” (Sojourners, Jan. 2017, p.8).

Kathleen Norris contrasts the fear of Herod with the faith of Mary and Joseph. Those Wise Men who traveled to Bethlehem, as they followed that star, are being drawn to Jesus as a sign of hope. Don’t we, the church of Jesus Christ, exist in this world by the call of God to be a sign of hope through our ministries and relationships? Norris writes that the church represents “a lessening of fear’s shadowy power, and increase in the available light”.

Through the ministries of ESL, the embracing of immigrants coming as refugees from violent regimes, through all the various ministries of our church, and by our faithfulness to Christ in our discipleship, how we live our lives and treat each other, we shed the light of Christ. Like those sages of old, we refuse to participate in the ways of Herod but follow the leading of God’s Spirit on another road. As Norris concludes, we “leave Herod in his palace, surrounded by flatterers, all alone with his fear” (Homiletics, p.13).

As we gather around Christ’s Table, we don’t know what the New Year will bring. But our times are in God’s hand and as we pay attention to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, God will lead us and we will become signs of God’s salvation hope in a world full of fear and hate.

