

“FLIGHT--AND FIGHT!” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, January 3, 2021

In our double gospel lesson from Matthew this morning we not only have the story of the Wise Men arriving at Jesus’ manger in Bethlehem. We also have a dramatic account of what happened afterwards, which in our own day is not always remembered, but should be. Looming ominously front and center, as well as behind the scenes, is a villain whose hunger for power and control underscores that in the world evil is real and is not time-bound. Instead, evil has always existed and always will. This fact requires us to be on the alert and all the more steadfast in our own courage, our own faithfulness to God, and our own commitment to what is righteous and good.

Our passage starts out happily. Three Magi from the East, who were probably Persian or Babylonian astrologers, set out on a quest to discern the significance of an unusual star they have observed in the West. Based upon their own astrological beliefs, these Magi or wise men suspect that the star portends or heralds the birth of some great king. They travel long distances in their quest, possibly more than a thousand miles. Their journey would have taken them months and months. Finally, as Matthew’s Gospel tells us, the wise men arrive in Jerusalem, the capital of ancient Israel, which was then known as Judea.

Within the city’s gates, the Magi make inquiries, asking “Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews?” (*Matthew 2:2*) Their straight-forward question is more provocative than they may realize. It causes an immediate public stir. What are these strangers talking about?—everyone wonders. After all, Judea already has a ruler endorsed by the Imperial Roman Senate. His name is Herod. He reigns as “king of the Jews.”

Apparently, King Herod keeps a close ear to the ground. As a very grasping, controlling ruler, he no doubt has his legion of spies. He soon learns of the Magi’s presence within Jerusalem’s gates, as well as the nature of their inquiry. Sensitive to threats and dangers from all directions, Herod acts with dispatch. He quickly convenes Jerusalem’s chief priests and top teachers of the law. With the balance of power at stake, Herod has some big question in mind for them all. If the Magi are right about the star as an announcement of a king’s birth, could this king be Israel’s long-awaited messiah? If so, where is the messiah most likely to be found born?

As it turns out, the chief priests and teachers of the law do not hesitate in their answers. They apparently agree that the star may portend the messiah’s birth. Moreover, citing the authority of the ancient Prophet Micah, they inform Herod that Bethlehem is the most assuredly birthplace. After all, this is where the fabled King David was born almost

a thousand years and fourteen generations earlier. Also, as Micah foresees and foretells, Bethlehem is destined to be birthplace for a Davidic and messianic descendant, anointed by God to shepherd and rule the Jewish people as never before. (*Micah 5:2, 4; Matthew 1:1-17, 2:3-6*)

A natural schemer, Herod next summons the Magi for a secret audience. Based on what the chief priests and teachers of the law have told them, he advises the Magi to look to Bethlehem, less than a half-dozen miles away. Yet amid all his feigned graciousness and hospitality, Herod also recruits these three men to become his unwitting spies. No doubt with all the charm he can muster, Herod says to the Magi: “Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I may go and worship him.” (*Matthew 2:8*)

Congregation, can you imagine anything worshipful about Herod’s intentions. No! Herod is a duplicitous and diabolical man. In back of his brain, the wheels are turning and turning. Basically, he already plotting as to how he might snuff out the life of one who, now or later, might threaten, then dissolve, his hold on Judea’s throne.

Departing from Herod’s presence, the Magi soon discover that Micah’s ancient prophecy, as recalled by Jerusalem’s chief priests and teachers of the law, is true. At Bethlehem they not only encounter the star looming larger than ever. Beneath it, bathed in starshine, in the rudest of Bethlehem dwellings, they find a new-born child with his mother Mary. However humble the setting, they have no doubt that the child beheld is the one for whom they have been so long searching—the cause and reason for the star. Great is their joy! Although they are gentiles, not Jews, they are nevertheless moved to bow in worship of the Baby Jesus. As a further token of their devotion, they present the now famous and precious gifts of “gold, frankincense, and myrrh.” (*Matthew 2:10*) Such reverence before Jesus certainly exemplifies the fact that the most intelligent wisdom and the most profound faith are not at all incompatible. Yet the bended knees of the Magi, who are foreigners to Israel, also foreshadows the devotion of millions of other gentiles in centuries to come.

Of course, in still another way, beyond their worship of Jesus, the reverent Magi reveal themselves to be as wise as wise can be. While still in Bethlehem at Jesus’ side, they are blessed with a dream which warns them against returning to Jerusalem where the dangerous clutches of a cunning King Herod await. Though some might discount and dismiss dreams, these Magi do not. Instead, they have the good sense to treat their dream as the divine warning it is. Consequently, rather than begin a return to their country by the way they came, they go “by another route.” (*Matthew 2: 12*) Through such precaution they not only preserve their own lives. They also end up protecting the life of the vulnerable Baby Jesus.

Most happily, as it turns out, the Magi are not only ones who pay attention to dreams. Shortly after the Magi depart from Bethlehem, Mary's husband Joseph has a dream of his own. In that dream, an angel of the Lord appears to him with some most urgent advice. "Get up," the angel says to the faithful Joseph. "Take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child and kill him." (*Matthew 2:13*) Accordingly, that very night, Joseph, Mary, and the Baby Jesus take flight. Ahead of them, proceeding once more by mare or donkey, is a 400 mile trek to safety. What follows after that are several years of exile in Egypt, just as once prophesized for Israel's future messiah by the Old Testament prophet Hosea. (*Hosea 11:1*)

Naturally, when King Herod finds out that the Magi have both outwitted and evaded him, he is outraged and furious. (*Matthew 2:16*) Now, not a little anxious and desperate, he, like the Egyptian pharaoh in Moses' day, sends forth his henchmen on a lethal dragnet. He commands them to kill all Bethlehem boys, two years and younger. (*Exodus 1:22*) By such vile decree, Herod brings trauma and grief to household after household throughout Bethlehem.

This Herodian massacre has long been remembered in the annals of the Christian Churches as "The Slaughter of the Innocents." In fact, to this day, it is formally observed in the liturgies of Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches annually on either December 28 or 29th. The Orthodox, Syrian, and Egyptian Christian churches, which are based in the East, have traditionally estimated that anywhere between 14,000 to 144,000 children were murdered by Herod. However, the Roman Catholic Church in the West has taken closer note of Bethlehem's actual census-recorded population from that era. On this basis, Catholic authorities have asserted that no more than 32 children were likely killed. Nevertheless, Western Roman Catholicism joins with Eastern Christianity in honoring all of the murdered children as the first Christian martyrs. In the church calendar, the "Slaughter of the Innocents" is meant to be a reminder of how brutal those of this world can be towards innocent children and our own responsibility to do everything we can to protect children.

Matthew's Gospel subsequently informs us that Joseph, Mary, and Jesus were able to safely remain as refugees in the bosom of Egypt for several years until King Herod dies. I have often wondered what could have happened if Egypt had been less charitable and welcoming as it once was in Moses' day.

In any event, Joseph eventually receives a divine all-clear that it is okay to return to their native land. Once again, the instructions come from an angel in a dream. However, the instructions are pretty precise. Indeed, Joseph is told to settle his family in rural Galilee, rather than Judea. While one of Herod's sons, Antipas, now rules Galilee, his older, more

violent and murderous brother, Archelaus, reigns in Judea. Just as the angel advises, it's better to stay away! Ultimately, the fact that Joseph, Mary, and Jesus do settle in Galilee and, specifically, Nazareth further fulfills an Old Testament prophecy from the Book of Jeremiah that Israel's Bethlehem-born messiah and redeemer is to be "called a Nazarene." (*Jeremiah 31:15; Matthew 2:23*)

Congregation, the story that Matthew's gospel shares with us about the Magi, King Herod, and flight of Mary, Joseph, and the Baby Jesus is a bold saga. So bold and dramatic that more secularly-minded historians contend that it could be more fanciful than factual! Yet even the facts collected by such skeptics only lend credibility to the original witness of scripture. Think about this... Just four days before Christmas this past year, a conjunction of the planets Jupiter and Saturn recreated for the first time in eight hundred years what once might have been interpreted by ancient astrologers as the Star of Bethlehem. In fact, several highly respected contemporary astronomers have speculated that an identical planetary phenomenon occurred during the same period that Jesus was born. Significantly, also, the ancient Persians and Babylonians, living in the region today known as Iran and Iraq, were particularly famous for their astrological interest and skills. They were the great scientists of their day.

Meanwhile, King Herod, as documented by non-biblical sources, really was as vicious as Matthew's gospel makes him out to be. Although called "Herod the Great" because he engaged in so many major building projects, this Judean king ruled strictly at the pleasure of Rome. Many Jews questioned Herod's right to Judea's throne because his grandfather was an Edomite who only converted to Judaism. Beginning with Herod's name, which was Greek, rather than Hebrew, prominent members of the Jewish community doubted the honesty of his profession of Jewish faith. Although he was responsible for the construction of the Great Jerusalem Temple which Jesus visited many times over in his own lifetime, Herod—to please everybody—also built temples honoring pagan gods.

Meanwhile, provocative, shocking, and offensive to the Jewish devout was the fact that Herod actually hung a Roman Golden Eagle above an entrance of Jerusalem's Great Temple as a sign of his ultimate allegiance to Caesar's empire. This compromised Jewish prohibitions on anything that might be taken or even mistaken for an idol. In his own ministry, Jesus was to refer to this surviving Roman emblem as "desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be." (*Mark 13:14*)

Last but not at all least, Herod never hesitated to eliminate any potential rivals whom he regarded as a threat to his own power and rule. Historians inform us that Herod murdered his own wife Miriam, as well as his mother-in-law Salome and his brother-in-law Kostabar. In an act of paranoia, Herod even charged two of his younger sons,

Alexander and Aristobolus, with high treason. After a sham trial, he ordered them executed in 7 B.C.--not long before Jesus' birth and the ensuing massacre at Bethlehem. Some husband! Some father! Some king! Thus, all known sources verify that for all the magnificence which Herod claimed for himself, he was fully capable of seeking to murder Jesus too. He would have successfully done so had Joseph and Mary not been divinely warned to flee.

As I suggested at the outset, this entire gospel portion from Matthew underscores how good and evil coexist in the world. The goodness of the Magi, popularly called "kings," is counterposed by Matthew with the evil heart and mind of King Herod. Herod is a perfect illustration of the saying, "Power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely." Yet, like other power-mad dictators, how foolish Herod really was. Did he actually believe that he could thwart God by murdering an infant messiah? The God proclaimed by both Judaism and Christianity is a God of justice. Injustice may seem to flourish for a time. But it cannot, will not, last.

As revealed through the full life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God remains committed to the redemption of a sinful humankind and the ultimate triumph of good over evil. Hitler learned this. So did Italy's Benito Mussolini, Cambodia's Pol Pot, Uganda's Idi Amin, and Iraq's Saddam Hussein. All wreaked havoc in their time. Yet none of them prevailed. In a validation of Jesus' own pronouncement in the Garden of Gethsemane that those who live by the sword die by the sword, most of these evil men died violently. (*Matthew 25:52*) Today, Herod, the precursor of those terrible dictators, not only faces the judgment of history but also, more importantly, the judgment of God, which condemns the ruthless way he lived and ruled. Yes, the greatness of the so-called "Herod the Great" is ambivalent, ironic, or paradoxical at best. Herod's very name evokes horror, as it should, for any who knows his or her history, biblical and otherwise.

As I see it, the whole story of the Magi and the flight of the Holy Family to Egypt stands as a profound warning. Each of us need to be wary of evil men and women and their work. Above all, we, like the Magi and Joseph, need to listen carefully in those moments when God warns us against evil. Obviously, none of us should idly or capriciously brand another human being as evil. Yet we have a moral duty to call out and name evil when it truly is evil.

Sometimes in the moment the best that we can do is to flee evil men and women and their machinations. But how important it is to take a stand, just as a grown Jesus did, when God provides the opportunity and means to confront, check, and defeat the evil powers that be. That's exactly what Jesus was doing in the Great Jerusalem Temple built by Herod when he overturned the tables of money traders and pigeon-sellers and accused them and the Temple leadership of making God's house a den of thieves. (*Mark*

11:15; Matthew 21:12) God resurrected Jesus as the ultimate testimony that wickedness and cruelty do not have the final say in his creation--let alone for his kingdom to come.

Of course, it is easy to see what is amiss with others. As Jesus warned, we should not allow the corruption and misdeeds of others to blind us to the faults in ourselves.

(Matthew 7:3-5; Luke 6:42) Sin and selfishness on our part make it easier for evil people to manipulate us. In this way we can become enablers of evil. Consequently, it is so important for us in resisting the evil in others to fight against the least manifestation of it in us. Our faith in Jesus Christ, who recognizes and forgives our frailties and failures even as he calls us to rise above them to become better people, can empower us to do this. Congregation, let's remember that!

As the Christmas season progresses to Epiphany, may we make this fresh sacred season a new season for us in our renewed devotion to what is righteous, good, and loving—truly faithful to the life and example of that child born at Bethlehem. **Amen.**