

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on January 2, 2022 (Christmas 2C)

It's irrational really. Big bad Herod afraid of a tiny little baby. King Herod the Great, powerful and feared ruler of Ancient Palestine, terrified by a helpless infant lying in a manger in Bethlehem. A man who ruthlessly ruled for 37 years as the appointed Roman king, scared of a newborn child.

For all his bluster Herod lived in constant fear of losing his throne; which only made him tighten his grip, brutalize his subjects, and abuse his power. Not even his family members were safe from Herod's paranoia. During his long reign, he had one of his wives and several of his sons murdered for allegedly plotting against him. The Roman emperor, Caesar Augustus, used to say that, as Herod didn't eat pork, it was safer to be one of Herod's pigs than one of Herod's sons.

So, when Herod encounters these Wise Men from the East who inquire about this child who "has been born King of the Jews" Herod's hackles are raised. Seething with anger and driven by insecurity he plots to destroy this perceived threat to his sovereignty.

You can almost hear Herod's internal conversation: "Newborn king? But *I'm* the king! This pretender must be eliminated." So he tries to trick the Wise Men into telling him the exact location of this new king so that he, too, can go "worship" him.

But of course this child was no danger to Herod's reign, for Jesus was a different kind of king; one not concerned with earthly power, but one possessing heavenly authority. As would happen so often in Jesus' life, Herod misunderstood what the reign of Jesus would entail and misinterpreted the root of his authority. It was not of this world, it was never of this world.

Now what truly frightened Herod was not, obviously, a newborn child. It was the potential loss of power and control. Never mind that Jesus had no interest in overthrowing temporal rulers. Yet the mere hint that Herod would lose his grip on his kingdom led him to drastic measures. In an attempt to rid himself of this potential threat he would order the murder of every male child in Bethlehem under the age of two. This slaughter of those who would be known as "the Holy Innocents" gives a glimpse into Herod's true character and the lengths he would go to maintain control of his kingdom.

Every year, the church remembers these slain children just three days after Christmas. A vivid and stark reminder that Jesus' birth is not without cost. That it is not all lowing cattle and singing angels. That God's entrance into the world unleashes desperate forces that oppose the way of love and compassion. Such forces still exist in our world. People who feel their grip on the traditional levers of power slipping away, often go to extreme measures to maintain the status quo. Whatever the human cost.

And, in this sense, Herod's reaction to this perceived threat to his power is a pretty natural human response. Not the slaughter of innocent children – that's diabolical. But we all get territorial at times; and when we get territorial we get defensive; and when we get defensive we sometimes do irrational things that push against the way of Jesus, against the way of love.

It's said that cornered animals are the most dangerous. When an animal is feeling threatened and trapped it will attack. Even a normally sweet domesticated dog, if pushed too far, will remind us that it is first and foremost an animal driven by the instinct of self-preservation. Herod spent his entire life like a cornered animal, baring his teeth at anyone who got too close, lashing out at the slightest perceived provocation. Which sounds like a pretty miserable existence. Despite all the trappings of power, in the end, Herod was all about self-preservation and survival.

The arrival of the Christ child stands in such contrast to this fear and loathing. And we start to see that the way of Jesus is about sharing rather than hoarding, that it's about an open hand rather than a closed fist. There's a vulnerability in the manger that stands over and against the throne of Herod. Hay and straw vs. stone and iron. Oh, Jesus will sit on a throne one day. But it's an eternal throne of glory in the world that is to come, rather than a fleeting throne of precious stones. It's a throne rooted in love and compassion, rather than a throne rooted in fear and intimidation.

In the familiar story we hear this morning, Herod's approach also contrasts greatly with that of the Wise Men. We don't know much about these kings or their kingdoms except that they came from the East, that they were early astronomers seeking signs in the heavens. But we do know that they were on a journey; they followed a star seeking a force beyond themselves, beyond their own control. They were willing to let go and enter into the unknown. Even if it meant leaving behind the familiar and the comfortable.

Herod sought to "worship" Jesus by killing him. But the Wise Men paid him homage not only by bringing gifts but also their joy. We hear that when the star stopped over that stable in Bethlehem they were "overwhelmed with joy." Something it's hard to imagine Herod ever being overwhelmed by.

So these Wise Men are anything but cornered. They are free to wander and wonder; they seek truth even if it draws them beyond the familiar. From our perspective, they seem to be open to the moving of the Holy Spirit. They are not seeking to control outcomes, but remain open to possibilities.

It's worth reflecting upon the ways and situations where we act more like cornered animals in our defensiveness and acting out, and the ways and situations where we act more like the Magi, open and responsive to the moving of the Spirit.

Being cornered usually draws us away from God because it's such an inwardly focused and fearful posture. It's hard to be joyful or open to the movement of the Spirit when we're fighting for survival. Be that at work, at home, or even in church. While being free to wonder opens us up to the possibility of transformation in our lives. When we lessen our death grip on the way we think things *should* be, we're able to more freely be led to where we *need* to be.

It is hard to let go of control, to put our lives into the hands of a God we cannot always see or feel. The Magi listened and followed rather than seeking to corner and control. We do well to follow the star right along with them. And know that wherever it leads us, Jesus himself will be there waiting for us.