

LOOK AGAIN
MATTHEW 2:1-13
FOR WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, GREENVILLE, SC
6 JANUARY 2019

Our second reading comes from Matthew , chapter two, verses one thru thirteen.

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, “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.’” Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “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.”

When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

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.’

You can't tell a good story without a solid grip on your characters. That's where the drama comes from. It doesn't matter that you're a king, what matters is that you're a mad king. Wandering seekers aren't interesting unless you learn something of what compels them forward (their motivations, their patterns of behavior). A baby is just a baby. Unless he's not.

I have always loved a nativity scene. That was my charge as a kid, carefully place each figure where it belonged, making sure Jesus was front and center. Year-to-year the scene

stayed much the same, mirroring what I saw and imagined from the world's many tellings: the baby with arms outstretched, a doting mother leaning forward, proud Joseph overseeing it all, wandering sheep and frightened shepherds, heralding angels defying gravity, and three kings with a freight of treasure. Frozen in its lovely simplicity. Uncomplicated, uncomplicating. In my memory and in the church's telling the drama wouldn't come till much later. As I saw it the Christmas story unfolded in uninterrupted joy, giving way, by the arrival of the wise men, to the simple peace of a domestic scene.

Strange, isn't it, when you hold that image against the story Matthew tells. Listen carefully, ignoring for a moment the scenes that populate your memory. The Epiphany story is not serene. From the beginning of the Jesus narrative Matthew signals trouble. All he has to do is start naming names, unpacking characters otherwise inert in our memories, and a careful hearer will sense something radical and disorienting on the horizon.

"In the time of Herod," Matthew recalls, "after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been born King of the Jews?'"

That's all he has to say and we're primed for a fight: Ali/Frazier, Hollyfield/Tyson. In one corner: Herod, one in a line of Herods, King of Jews only by proxy, not himself an adherent of the faith. Herod is a military commander that the Roman Emperor has tasked with ruling Judea, a primarily Jewish region in the Empire. He is shrewd and power-hungry, and has risen to a place of prominence by paranoia and politicking.

He is violent, prone to outbursts, and protective of his authority, a "king" of whims who ruled according to his own self-interest, which is perhaps why the Emperor once wrote of the Judean ruler that it would be better to be Herod's dog than his child.

Which brings us to the opposite corner. Up against Herod, prompting his posturing, is little baby Jesus. A child in the line of David born in Bethlehem, the ancestral home of the great king. This babe, bursting with divinity, this boy, whose light fills the sky, challenges Herod's authority, his control, his dominance. The child is King of Jews by right and proxy. He is the Messiah, King of Kings by divine reality. King of Empires by creator's right.

When Matthew sets the scene right smack in the middle of "the time of King Herod," the gospel writer sends us yet another signal: a paranoid man created paranoia, a violent,

capricious man set his people on edge. Jesus was not born in a neutral utopia. He was born in Herod's fear-filled Empire. When Herod was afraid, as the texts tells us, all Jerusalem feared with him. Get ready for some fireworks!

A mad king, pretender to David's throne, is confronted by rumors of a true king down the road, born in vulnerability, without an army, without nurses, without even a home. Herod is threatened.

Then the magi arrive and all hell breaks loose.

It's better to be Herod's dog than his child. But it's better to be his child than a child down the road, squirming in a stable, radiating a transformative light, announcing by a star and by his very being a world about to turn. Herod is set on edge.

Anton Chekov, the brilliant 20th century Russian playwright, found himself one evening at a friend's play. The stage was set with precision, prominently featuring, mounted to a wall, a rifle. The gun built in Chekov a sense of foreboding. But no one ever shot it. Reviewing the play he wrote to his friend, "One must never place a loaded rifle on the stage if it isn't going to go off. It's wrong to make promises you don't mean to keep." That piece of advice has come to be known as "Chekov's Rule." Watch for it in any show, any play, any book worth its salt: if a gun appears in the first act, it will go off by the third.

It's the first act of Matthew's gospel, and he shows us a gun. Herod, a mad king, is challenged by the very existence of a child lying in still repose across town. A sense of foreboding should swell in you. Knowing Herod schemes in the shadows should build your anticipation, raise your hackles. Matthew sets the stage in the first act. We all know what happens in the third.

Whether or not it is intentional, we miss the drama, the crisis, the joy of Matthew's text when we look only to our still nativities and not at the living witness of the gospel. The momentum, the challenge of God incarnate begins *now*, at the stable scene. Confronted with the Christ child, onlookers must make a decision.

Look at Matthew's nativity scene: what lies in the holy manger? Joy or threat? Risk or reward?

This summer a few folks from Westminster went to Cuba as a part of an exploratory trip seeking partnership with a congregation and a Seminary in the central region of the country. Though we traveled in the dry season, it was unseasonably rainy. Each afternoon brought new storms: a flash of rain accompanied by a crash of lightning and raucous thunder.

As it turns out, the Cuban folks we stayed with weren't much used to thunder storms (or "thunders" as they called the storms). The rain didn't bother them, but the thunder brought a fearful flinch.

One evening in Matanzas we sat on a second story porch playing card games. From nowhere the most beautiful thunder storm rolled in. There was no rain, just noise and light. It felt Olympian, as if a great cosmic battle was brewing above us. Steve Johnson pulled up his chair to watch. I pulled out my phone to record. The storm was electrifying.

The Americans, for the most part, stood agog, but our hosts bolted for safety. Each crack of "thunders" set them on edge. They urged us to reconsider our spots on the balcony, lured us with rum and black market cheese. But we, or at least I, were transfixed. We saw beauty, a scene no different than the pop up storms that define a Southern summer, familiar and benign, uncomplicated and uncomplicating. They saw a threat. Rolling blackouts, power surges, and food shortages—and they felt fear.

Who was right?

When the wise men find the stall they are overwhelmed — the text literally reads that they "rejoiced exceedingly with great joy." They were compelled by what they saw to fall down and worship this child. Imagine that! What awe, what wonder could cause such a thing! In the space of a glance their lives were transformed.

They saw the beauty. But they saw the terror too. It was not so familiar that they missed the crisis of choice. They understood that, having caught a glimpse of eternity, their lives would never be the same.

But that's not what Herod saw. Herod, who believes himself the only one in Judea to whom worship should be directed, sees in the manger an existential threat. He understands that his Kingdom is at risk. Everything he has worked for, everything he has killed for, fought for, schemed for, could be undone by a child born in a backwater

town south of the capital. He is not compelled to worship. Instead, he seeks the child's death.

The nativity, so benign in our memories, so familiar is far more radical than we allow it to be. When we proclaim that the Christ is born we are proclaiming that a power has come into the world in weakness, a power who will, by his death at the hands of another Herod, nonetheless defeat all strong men, who will, by the foolishness of the incarnation, bring a new light, a new order, a new day. When we gaze into the manger we are confronted by the cross.

Too much? You may think you prefer the Hallmark scene (uncomplicated, uncomplicating), but Hallmark will not set you free. Look again. Feel the crisis, the point of decision. What are you compelled to do? Understand that worshiping at the foot of the manger will mean turning from all other gods, that falling before the radiant Christ-child will threaten your status quo.

“To have a god,” wrote Luther in a reflection on the first commandment, “is simply to trust and believe in one with our whole heart...Now, I say, whatever your heart clings to and confides in, that is really your God.”

Joy or threat? Risk or reward? The Magi were right to worship, and Herod was right to tremble.

Two millennia later the world has not much changed. Like Herod, we sit in seats of power and call on the name of “God” while giving over our heart to pursuits of money, security, and the way things *ought* to be. We do not trust God with our whole being, we trust in our own schemes and products and people. We protect ourselves and our well-laid plans. We prefer to close ranks because deep down we know that true worship, a moment of divine confrontation whereby we reckon with the space between who we are and who are are called to be, will necessarily lead to radical, decentralizing transformation and self-sacrifice. It will lead to true discipleship: joyful, complicated, complicating.

That storm in Cuba was beautiful—unobscured by light pollution, so close your feet shook with the thunder. But it was a storm, an uncontrollable force of nature indifferent to human life. Our hosts were right to seek shelter. We couldn't help but gaze in wonder. Who was right?

Both, of course. It was a storm. But boy was it worth the show.

Epiphany ends the 12 days of Christmas. Our mangers will go down, packed away till next year. But the crisis—the choice—remains. Will you rise out of your everyday to seek the star, and what will you find? Will you allow God to disorient you, make you new? Will you embrace mystery and vulnerability—the incarnate God, and allow your life to be created in the image of Jesus Christ, lived in service for neighbors, for the sake of the enemies and friends? Or will you sit in the comfortable nostalgia of the world's gods?

The child will grow and so too will the challenge. What will you do? This is very same one who meets the lepers, crosses social and religious barriers, dines with the tax man; the one who transforms water to abundant wine, and who asks that we follow, from Bethlehem to Nazareth, to the cross. There is joy in discipleship, deep radiant joy, and there is challenge. That is what the magi see. The threat and the promise.

Look again and be transformed.