

The Feast of the Epiphany

Saint Paul's Cathedral, San Diego

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Gracious God,

Let these words be more than words and give us the spirit of Jesus.

Amen.

Here's a funny scene from one of the goofy "Pirates of the Caribbean" movies: Captain Jack Sparrow (Johnny Depp) is involved in swordplay with the righteous Will Turner (Orlando Bloom). After several minutes of flailing away at one another Turner gets the upper hand by swatting Sparrow's sword across the room. As he pivots to claim victory he finds himself face-to-face with a quickly drawn and cocked pistol. He protests this ungentlemanly ploy but is cut short by Sparrow's one-word defense; "Pirate!"

King Herod might offer up the same defense this morning. Why are you threatening the Christ-child and his family? Herod! Those who attended our Advent series with Professors Lindquist and Mosely know we're not dealing here with a meek monarch. Herod was a ruthless and useful functionary for Rome; he ruled from 37-4BCE and, through some skill and many murders, managed to keep a lid on things.

If pressed to explain the bad behavior revealed in today's text, Herod would argue he was simply doing that which was required; "I'm just Herod being Herod." Better to eliminate disruption as early as possible rather than let it root, grow and subvert. The king did that to members of his own family and court; taking out a tiny babe from a poor family in the hinterlands was of no concern to him.

Today's gospel challenges that casual embrace of mindless brutality. The Magi, the wise, see through it immediately. They understand that Herod has strayed far from God's purposes, that he is in fact his own god. They perceive that the one true God is doing a mighty thing in the universe and Herod dreads it. They play along while in the court lest they be detained but as soon as they're free again they chart a course very different from the one the king proposes. The wise refuse to imitate Herod - they choose not to become agents of paranoid violence - and witness instead to the glory of God's unfolding purpose in their lives and in the life of the world.

With them we today lay our gifts, praise and obedience, before the babe and his mother. We stand in awe. We also stand with the Magi and all who have been true to God and to themselves throughout our history. That's Herod's tragedy; his deepest identity was never tyrant or traitor or murderer - he was always a beloved child of God. He assumed those roles because they provided the most direct path to massive wealth and almost unchecked authority. In so doing he contorted his spirit, menaced others, and ruined his chance for abundant life.

That's both terribly sad and somewhat common, right? Herod's not the first person to choose lesser things and forsake the kingdom. It doesn't profit us to stand in judgment at this late date; we lament his loss and turn now to the Magi for instruction. What do they have to teach us about holiness and human freedom?

Many things. First, they teach us to see. They notice what others are missing – the star, in this case. Then they demonstrate the wisdom needed to interpret what they're seeing. They're able to make sense of it. Then they choose to put their lives aside and follow – not knowing where it will lead, not knowing how long it will take, not knowing the risks ahead. Then, when waylaid by Herod, they stay the course. They refuse to be co-opted by high but malevolent authority. They finish their mission by glorifying the Christ-child and avoid further complications by going directly home. We never hear of them again.

To summarize, these are people who know themselves, who know their way around the spiritual universe, who know their power to choose the good. They know their decisions will either deliver or destroy them. They opt for vision, wisdom, trust, courage, perseverance, adoration, and humility. I'm not sure we could name seven other characteristics as central as these to biblical faith.

And now, marking that, let's engage in a bit of historical fantasy. What would have happened if Herod had let the Magi set the agenda for their meeting two thousand years ago? What would have happened if Herod had been aware of his spiritual distress, confessing of it, and open to help? What would have happened if Herod had actually listened to the testimony of the Magi and allowed his life to be reformed in response to their witness?

Fantasy, no doubt. I ask the questions not on Herod's behalf but on ours. Perhaps it could have been different for him; it can always be different for us. But are we different? Are we as free as the Magi or as bound as Herod? Are we choosing peace over violence, praise over condemnation, trust over fear? These are questions of immense importance and they're not easily answered. We know the answer we'd like to give but our habits of mind sometimes undo us.

I'm sure I've previously mentioned the book, Telling Secrets, by Frederick Buechner. I bring it up again because the author faces today's question squarely. He describes his agony in dealing with his daughter's anorexia and, previously, his father's suicide. As part of his narrative he reflects on a section of the Tower of London known as the White Tower. This part of the edifice was built by William the Conqueror in the eleventh century. On the second floor there's a worship space called the Chapel of Saint John. Bare, simple, light, silent, beautiful, holy. Below the chapel is a dungeon. Heavy doors prevent any light or much air from entering. It measures four feet by four feet by four feet; no way to stand up or stretch out. The cell is known as the Little Ease.

Buechner writes, "I am the White Tower of course. To one degree or another all of us are. During the time of my daughter's sickness and its aftermath, I began to realize how much of my time I spent in that dark, airless, crippling place where there was no ease at all... Childhood fears persist in all of us, and what I feared most was losing what I loved the way years before I had lost a father I hardly knew well enough to love. So I clung onto my children for dear life because in many ways, too many ways, they were my life...I got so caught up in my daughter's slow starvation that I wasn't aware of the extent to which I myself was starving."

Well, it's certainly easy to excuse a loving father for that, isn't it? – especially one who knows the harsh reality of bitter loss. Buechner later describes his movement back towards trust, light and hope. He re-engages old friends, seeks therapy, and does 12-

Step work around his father's alcoholism. He also learns to rely on God in a new way. He describes, for instance, a walk he took along an almost deserted Vermont road. Despairing, he sat down on a stone bridge and spied a lone car coming in his direction. He noticed the personalized license plate as it passed – it read, "TRUST." It was the word of God, the precise word he needed to hear at that moment. Like the Magi, Buechner had the eyes to see, the wit to interpret, and the will to follow. He later learned the car belonged to the Trust Officer at the local bank but that didn't matter to him; God had spoken in his moment of need. Both he and his daughter arrived home safely, albeit by a road neither of them would have predicted.

Buechner tells his story artfully and honestly; I commend the book with enthusiasm. What he offers us today is a chance to put the question to ourselves; the Chapel of Saint John or the Little Ease? Where do we spend our time? Where do our thoughts take us - our fears, our guilt, our hope? Where do we place ourselves, especially as we hold to the promises of God in Christ? The choice is ours – peace in the presence of God or self-containment and contortion? We can ask it any number of ways: Chapel or dungeon? Praise or pettiness? Obedience or willfulness? Trust or dread? Magi or Herod? The question, in any form, is now before us: if you've been a bit slow in making resolutions for the coming year, you may want to ponder it for a moment sometime this week.