

Matthew 2:1-12 Pastor Bill Uetricht Epiphany 1/06/19

In the bleak winter, frosty wind made moan.
Earth stood hard as iron and water like a stone.
Snow had fallen, snow on snow on snow on snow.
In the bleak mid-winter long ago.
Angels and archangels may have gathered there.
Cherubim and seraphim filled the air.
But only the mother in her maiden bliss
Worshipped the beloved with a kiss.
What I can I give him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd I'd bring to him a lamb.
If I were a wise man I would do my part.
Yet what would I give him? I'd give to him my heart. (sung)

I love this old carol. It's one of my favorite ones for the Christmas season. It sweetly and beautifully sings of the Christmas story. In the end of the song, we are connected to the story that shows up in Matthew today, as it talks about the wise men who come to see Jesus and about the gifts they give. "If I were a wise man I would do my part." In some ways, this song gives us what David Lose calls the children's version, the G-rated version of the story from Matthew. It's a nice version. It's sweet. It asks us to think about what it is that we give to Jesus. It concludes that we are to give him our hearts.

That's a nice move and worthy of our consideration. What will we give to the God who gifts us with all things, who encounters us in the least likely of places, who is Emmanuel, God with us, hidden in the midst of the ordinary flow of everyday life? How do we respond to life that is not a matter of achievement or accomplishment, but rather a gift to be received? We do well to respond to this God by giving all that we are and have. That is a sweet response to a sweet gift.

But let's face the facts. Matthew's story is not all sweetness. In many ways, it is an adult story, a R-rated one. So while it is worth our while to tell the children's version, especially to children, it is just as worthwhile, and maybe even more so, to confront the less-than-sweet Matthew tale.

As John Jack pointed out in our Bible study, this story is satire. It is poking fun at a lot of things and a lot of people. Let's start with the wise guys. These men—they are not kings nor are there necessarily three of them—are depicted by Matthew as a bit bumbling. These foreigners who practice a foreign religion are supposed to be so smart. They are astrologers. They read the stars. But they can't seem to find where they are going. They are supposed to be arriving at Bethlehem, but they end up in Jerusalem, seven miles or so miles from their destination. They are men so obviously they didn't stop to ask for directions.

I don't know how many of you have seen Monty Python's "Life of Brian," but this satire of the life of Jesus has the wise men, bumbling as they are, showing up at the wrong house. It takes them a while to figure out they are looking at the wrong baby. Eventually, they head to Jesus' (Brian's) house and find him where he is supposed to be, only after they stumble their way there.

Matthew is giving us satire today. And he is especially interested in poking fun at the folks who are obsessed with power, the Herods of the world. The power mongers look silly today. Truth be told, people with power often will do all that they can to maintain their power. This is true not only for politicians and big wigs, but for ordinary people who in their little worlds have some kind of power that tends to justify their lives.

Look at Herod today! When he hears that these bumbling wise guys from Persia have entered his territory to visit a newborn baby, he gets frightened. Here is a mighty, bossy guy, who has lots of money and military might at his disposal and he is phenomenally nervous about the arrival of a little baby from Nowhere's-ville. It's ridiculous.

But people with a lot of power who take themselves entirely too seriously often look ridiculous. Narcissistic people who often are worried that their power is being torn from them frequently get a bit paranoid. You will find throughout history that despots and dictators

are often paranoid. They are always afraid that someone is going to rip power from their fingers. And so they do all kinds of crazy things.

First of all, they get very anxious. Not always, but often people preoccupied with power are anxiety-ridden. Now don't hear this as a critique of people who suffer from the very real psychological and physical condition of anxiety. Many people can't help the anxiety that they have. It is just written on their bodies. But I am not talking about this kind of anxiety. I am talking about the anxiety that stems from our need to control. When life is always to be controlled we will spend a lot of our time unsettled by our anxiety. And the interesting thing is that others around us are dragged into our anxiety. Note that Matthew tells us that when King Herod heard about the unsettling truth of the birth of the baby, he was frightened, *as was all Jerusalem!*

No exaggeration there!! But here's the truth: one person can unsettle a whole system. One person's anxiety can make loads of other people anxious. It happens in government, businesses, churches, families, and any other system you can come up with. Pretty soon the anxiety of one becomes the anxiety of everybody else. Pretty soon you are walking on egg shells around one person, avoiding topics, waiting for the other shoe to fall, because that one person's anxiety is penetrating everything and everybody, often as a result of their trying to hold on to power that they are afraid is slipping away from them.

Now paranoia and anxiety are not the only consequences of the need to control or keep power. When life is about maintaining control, we also often start plotting, lying and manipulating. When Herod gets the news about a baby's birth he brings together the chief priests and scribes of the people. In other words, the political establishment brings in the religious establishment. And I think you know that this will not be the last time that they will plot together.

After the chief priests and scribes tell Herod about Micah's message that the great ruler that they have been waiting for will come from Bethlehem, Herod *secretly* calls the wise men into his office in order to discover from these astrologers the *exact* time when the star

had appeared. The need to maintain to power and control often leads to secrecy.

One of the unsettling things about the movie “Vice,” a film about the politics of the early part of this century, is the way it reveals the kind of secrecy so many politicians live in. Whether this movie’s portrayal is historically accurate or not, it certainly does shed light on the truth that the public face of so many of us does not match the private reality. We live in a lot of secrecy. Maintaining control often demands secrecy.

It all too often demands lying. When Herod bids the wise guys a bon voyage he tells them that he wants them to come back to him to tell him about their trip to Bethlehem so that he can worship the child, too. Ya, right! He’s not interested in worshipping. When you are preoccupied with control and power, seldom will you worship. That means you will have to let go of yourself. Herod is not going to let go of himself; he might have to let go of control. Herod’s mode of operating is manipulation. Power mongers often manipulate. Sadly, so many of the people they manipulate too often fail to recognize the manipulation, until it is too late. The story of Jim Jones from the late seventies who was able to get over 900 people to commit suicide by drinking poisoned Kool aide bears witness to that stark reality.

Now it is interesting to contrast all the negative realities that Herod is participating in with what the wise men, as bumbling as they are, experience in the news of the birth of the baby Jesus. Matthew tells us that when they arrive at Jesus’ house, the place over which the star shone, they were “overwhelmed with joy.” Literally the Greek says, “They rejoiced exceedingly, great joy greatly.” They were really, really, really, really, really happy. Herod doesn’t seem too happy. There is not much joy in his step.

There often isn’t much joy in people who have to control. They are so busy trying to control that they don’t have time to have a good time. It’s in letting go that we ultimately find true joy. Herod can’t let go. People obsessed with power often can’t let go. They often then are

lonely, locked up in their own little worlds, complaining about everybody else, lacking in true joy.

The adult version of the wise man story really is convoluted, full of intrigue, ugly lying, plotting, and manipulation. It is full of real life, the kind of real life that we often want to keep from our kids. Truthfully, it is only going to get worse in Matthew. Soon Jesus and his family will become refugees, fleeing their home land, crossing a border into another land. And then we are going to hear about violence—really ugly violence that will threaten the lives of children. Power can be ruthless and a victimizer of the very young.

So where is the good news in all of this? It certainly isn't found in Herod. He has bad news written all over him. This baby, though, born in the midst of all these shenanigans, is good news. You see, God comes even in the midst, especially in the midst of the work of power mongers. He comes in the midst of real life. He comes not with an attempt to beat the power-obsessed people at their own game. He plays an entirely different game. He comes hidden in the small, the insignificant, the vulnerable.

He comes unveiling all of our power games for what they really are: silly, ridiculous, laughable, something to satirize, something to make fun of. He comes bringing us a whole new world. It is not the world of Herod; it is the world of a tiny baby. What shall we bring this tiny baby? "If I were a wise man, I would do my part. Yet what would I give him? I'd give to him my . . . heart." (sung)

I'd let go of my obsession with power. And I'd give him my heart. I'd give him the depths of who I am so that he can use me in his work to build a whole new world, a world not obsessed with power but obsessed with compassion and love.