



[Pastor Steven Billings](#)

Sermon for The Feast of Epiphany
January 2, 2022

In the Days of Herod the King **Matthew 2:1-12**

¹ Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, ² saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” ³ When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵ They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: ⁶ “‘And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.’”

⁷ Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. ⁸ And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.” ⁹ After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. ¹¹ And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. ¹² And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

Well . . . by now all the adults are aware that the joyous season of Christmas has a downside . . . or even . . . you might say . . . a dark side.

For example, if you used a lot of plastic to support your holiday gatherings and gift exchanges . . . the inevitable cloud of monthly statements will soon begin to make its way to your mailbox – if it hasn’t already. And if that’s happened, then you already know a small corner of that darkness! There’s a price to pay for the joy of Christmas!

But, in a sense, darkness has always been a part of Christmas. The first hint of that was what I read earlier in today’s Gospel. Did you catch it? “Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king . . .” (Mt. 2:1a).

There’s the clue: “In the days of Herod the king.” How’s *that* a clue?, you ask. Well . . . you have to know a little bit about King Herod. In those days the Romans had a little saying that had a *lot* of truth to it: “Far safer to be Herod’s pig than to be his son!” That expression reflects the cruelty of Herod, who, while on his death bed, ordered that one of his sons be killed as punishment for some minor offense!

Of course, we also remember the trouble and darkness that resulted from the Magi’s



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visit. The price of their coming to worship Jesus included the blood of every male child, two years old and younger, in and around Bethlehem! All of the young boys – that is except Jesus, who escaped by God’s protection.

Herod, like most bullies and tyrants, was so insecure, that when he heard the rumor that a Baby had been born, who was destined to be King of the Jews, he ordered that all the babies, who might be that King-to-be, be slaughtered. Only God knows how many tears and how much heartache was suffered by the parents of those murdered infants!

And in today’s Gospel you heard that “all Jerusalem” was disturbed along with Herod at the news of the birth of this newborn King. You’d be “disturbed” too if you lived under the rule of such a cruel, heartless dictator and knew that, if *he* was upset, anything could – and very well might – happen to you or to your loved ones!

All this “darkness” and suffering was caused by Herod, who was in power at the time of Jesus’ birth. To live in the time of King Herod was to live in darkness and misery with little joy and just as little hope for the future.

And, even though this horrendous man, King Herod, has been dead for 2,000 years, we live, and our babies continue to be born, in such a time. His rule of fear still holds sway over the world in which we live.

It can be found in faraway places like Iraq or Afghanistan, where peoples or tribes, who at one time lost their bid for territorial power, now find themselves to be the ones in charge again, and with utter abandon, render “payback” to those who’d hurt them in the past.

It also can be found a *lot* closer to home! Herod rules near us as well! He rules in our homes, in our extended families, in our places of work and school, and even, at times, within the Church of Christ here on earth!

Have you set traps for your enemies, or those who you think have hurt you?

Have you caused fear in the hearts of others by your attitude or actions – even in recent days?

Do you live in fear – fear that sometimes causes you to act in ways that seem foreign to you?

The reign of fear, a lust for vengeance, and the dreams of delicious vindication are everywhere, aren’t they? Even we, whom our Lord Jesus has called “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world” – we’re actually part of the darkness! Under cover of darkness – sadly and pathetically – we, too, find ourselves in the employ of Herod!

But we can’t merely look backwards to our Epiphany Gospel. No. We must also look forward. There comes another moment in Matthew’s Gospel where visitors other than the Magi come to Jerusalem seeking the King of Israel.

Once again Jerusalem is troubled with fear and confusion. This time, too, soldiers are sent out, and agents of terror rule the night. This time it’s not all the little boys two years of age and younger they grab. No, this time they grab the only One who escaped their blood-drenched swords 30 years earlier.



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This time, they apprehend the King-to-be, and put Him on a path of certain death. Yes, this time the Bethlehem Child who escaped the first Herod falls victim to the reign of terror and fear of another! This time, the Child who escaped the first Herod's swords, now freely offers His life to rid the world of "the days of Herod the king" and all the repercussions of that reign.

I mentioned earlier that Christmas comes at a price. On a far grander scale, our salvation also came at a price: the price of Jesus' very life! That price He willingly paid. "For the joy that was set before him endured the cross (Heb. 12:2b). "The founder and perfecter of our faith" (Heb. 12:2a) died on Calvary's bloody hill, paying – out of His eternal storehouse of love – the penalty due all of us "little Herods," suffering the deadly consequence of our sins, and then rose again in glory on the third day. The dark price of Christmas was paid by Jesus, the eternal Son of God, who came specifically into the world, as Isaiah told us earlier, to remove the darkness that covers the earth, the thick darkness over the peoples," especially those caught up in the Herod-ness rampant then and now.

He who has ears to hear, let him hear this Epiphany message! Repent of your sins! Repent of your willing contribution to the reign of fear in the lives of other people. Repent and look to Christ, your Redeemer and Purifier, He who cleanses you and makes you whole once again. Repent and receive the True Light that shines in the darkness of this world.

For the Light that is Christ shines among us former subjects and at times willing followers of Herod. The light of Christ rules in our hearts and lives so that we may no longer live in "the days of Herod the king," in darkness and misery, with little joy and little hope for the future. Instead, through faith in Him, we receive what we need the most: forgiveness, life, and salvation – paid for us by Jesus' blood.

Where once there was hatred and the spirit of revenge, now the language of forgiveness can be heard.

Where once there was jealousy, now a spirit of generosity can be found!

Where once there was only fear and loneliness, now the courage and confidence to face all of life's darkness can be seen and experienced.

Dear people of God, baptized into the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, Himself, in a few minutes we'll continue our worship of Jesus, as did the Magi. We'll offer prayers to our God, thanking Him for what He has done for us in the past, and humbly ask Him to continue His blessings to us in all of our tomorrows.

We'll bring our offerings to His altar, imitating the gold and frankincense that were offered to Him by the Magi. We'll take the cup and eat the bread that are His very body and blood given us to share until the end of time!

And then, like the Wise Men, we'll go home by another route. We'll take a new path, the path of God's righteousness, a road that the Herod of old doesn't know.

And as we travel, we'll seek opportunities to tell others of God's Son, who came into this world so that we may share together in the promise in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 3:6b)



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May we, then, by God's grace, walk this path through time into eternity, where Christ is the Light and there will be no more darkness. In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen