

January 6, 2018

“Unexpected: Unthinkable Violence and Victory”

Matthew 2:1-23

Advent and Christmas in Luke’s Gospel (chapters 1-2) have connected us with several people who have inspired our faith and pointed us to Jesus: old Zechariah the priest and his long-barren wife, Elizabeth; a young teenager named Mary and her very trusting husband-to-be, Joseph; a little boy named John who would grow up to be an eccentric prophet and prepare the way for his cousin; unnamed shepherds pulling the night shift; wise and expectant Simeon; and faithful, exuberant Anna.

The passage for Epiphany (Matthew 2) connects us to even more people; most notably the wise men, or Magi. In the context of Israel and the Ancient Near East, Magi would have been seen by God’s people as pagans, gentiles, idolaters – but learned nonetheless. The Greek word for wisemen, *Magoi*, is only used twice in the New Testament in the Book of Acts. In both cases it has a negative slant. Magi were seen as superstitious and misguided people who look to the creation for guidance instead of the Creator. Matthew’s painting them in a good light seems to be yet another way he is trying to show his Jewish audience how, in fact, God’s love flows outside the usual, expected boundaries – way outside. Matthew connects us to the wise men.

We also get connected to King Herod in Matthew 2. “In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea . . .” (Matthew 2:1)

Much is known about Herod and his accomplishments, not from the scriptures but from the history books. Josephus is the historian who has helped us fill in the blanks more than any other. In the New Year’s Day (8th Day of Christmas) devotion in *Preparing for Jesus*, Walter Wangerin informs us a bit about this insecure yet powerful leader who built two entire cities. “What a great king was he! When after ten years that second city was completed, Herod announced abroad a great festival with which to dedicate and to celebrate his vast accomplishment . . . Ambassadors came and knelt before the King, both to give him gifts and to receive gifts from him. Priests of various religions came likewise. Astrologers. Magi . . . Herod built grand buildings, too, in cities old and long inhabited. This is the king who remodeled Jerusalem. He built a fortress north of the Temple, a palace on the western edge of the city, towers of size and strength – and the Temple. Herod rebuilt the Temple, enlarging the Mount, constructing double porches on three sides of the Temple courts, establishing gates beautiful, forged of the golden-silver bronze of Corinth. How good was this king to the religion of his people! And to himself as well, since south of the Mount he built a royal basilica more glorious than the Temple itself, a place for his own approaching. Sadly, [Herod] was not a priest. He could never enter the sanctuary of the Temple. He could build what he could not enter. Humble Zechariah could enter there. Great Herod could not. Therefore, Great Herod built for himself a greater house than the one wherein the Lord God dwelt. Then one day for no particular reason (he had ordained no

celebration nor finished a building project) certain envoys arrived in Jerusalem to do homage to a King. Magi, they were. Astrologers from the East. Star-readers whose profession Rome despised. And Herod was ever beholden to Rome. It didn't matter how well these people might read the natural signs; they meant nothing to Herod. And he would have dismissed them their miserable homage – until he discovered that it was not to him that they had come, but to a *newborn* king. What other King was there for Jews? Herod neither met nor understood the Newborn King, because that one's kingship was not of the world, but Herod defined greatness in terms of the world. Greater greatness than his own must mean greater splendor, greater armies, greater power – and a will to kill its enemies. What else could he do, then, but fear and hate the Newborn? – of whom the angel said, 'His kingdom will have no end' ” Matthew connects us to King Herod.

And finally, Matthew connects us to mothers and little boys whose names we will never know. We'd rather this were NOT in our Christmas story. “When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent soldiers to kill all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men.” (Matthew 2:16)

What's **Unexpected** for those of us who have loved wisemen and camels crowding into our crèches/nativity sets while we sing “We Three Kings” and hum “Little Drummer Boy,” is the **Unthinkable Violence** that follows the Magi's royal visit to Jerusalem and their short journey down to Bethlehem. This kind of senseless slaughter still happens in our world today – in different places and for different reasons – but nowadays when the media covers these modern atrocities, the global public and rulers of today's powerful countries are shocked, declare their outrage against such barbaric acts, and threaten immediate sanctions and penalties.

But for those who really knew King Herod they weren't shocked at all; and they knew that threats against him would do no good. He was just the type of 'religious' leader Rome could endorse and protect. He was a tyrant, murderer, and madman. In his book, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, Philip Yancey summarizes a few of Herod's violent highlights (lowlights): “[Herod] killed two brothers-in-law, his own wife, and two of his own sons. Five days before his death he ordered the arrest of many citizens and decreed that they be executed on the day of his death, in order to guarantee a proper atmosphere of mourning in the country. For such a despot, a minor extermination procedure in Bethlehem posed no problem.”

We have art depicting this called the “Slaughter of the Innocents” painted by some of the masters but don't send Christmas cards portraying it. We don't place this reading on Christmas Eve out of sensitivity to visitors who need to hear the Good News. We'd rather forget this part of the Christmas story.

But even with all the weeping and wailing of Rachel's descendants, God's rescue mission for the whole world was underway – and it would not and will not be stopped. I know that won't be a comfort to all these mothers in Ramah who wailed in that horrible moment – and it may not be very comforting in this moment for those in the midst of loss and violence and hatred. But if we get stuck in this **Unthinkable Violence**, we'll never get further along in God's larger story and His **Unthinkable Victory** – carried out in seemingly normal and supernatural ways.

God is sovereign, and even evil incarnate cannot stop Him from carrying out His plan of redemption. In the first two chapters of Matthew alone, God uses a variety of means to accomplish His purposes and protect His Son.

There are five different **dreams** between Matthew 1:20 and 2:22. The combination of all these dreams keeps Joseph in the game with Mary, prevents the Wise Men from returning to Herod, gets Joseph, Mary and Jesus out of Dodge in the nic-of-time, lets them know when it's safe to return from Egypt, and helps them re-settle in Nazareth of all places.

In our cerebral, Western context – especially in the Reformed tradition – we may minimize how God can use seemingly subjective dreams; but we know He's still using the dreams and visions of people in the Muslim-majority world today – to introduce them to Jesus. God's plan of redemption and restoration and reconciliation WILL BE carried out so that people from every tribe and nation proclaim the Jesus is the King. God is sovereign over our dreams and can lead people to Jesus through them.

He also uses the heavens to instigate the journey of the wise men. “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed His star at its rising.” (Matthew 2:2) Most people believe this “light in the sky” wasn't a star but the near passing of Jupiter and Saturn. Whatever it was, God used it to send a message to foreign, non-believing pagans. Would that we pray for God to do this more often? Not because salvation is found in the stars, but because people who are searching for a sign and a Savior are more likely to listen when we open the scriptures to them – if something in the natural world draws them in as well. God's Holy Word is His clearest

revelation of all, but He is also revealed in creation at some level. Dale Bruner says this in his commentary on Matthew: “God uses the natural world and our experience in it to convict us of our need, to awaken our longings, and, where God’s grace supports, to bring us to The Word in the Church. This word directs us, finally, to our destination . . . Christ. God’s revelation in nature raises the question and begins the quest; God’s revelation in scripture gives the answer and directs the quest to its goal. God’s revelation in Christ, who is the goal, satisfies the quest.” (*The Christbook: Chapters 1-12*) God is sovereign over creation and leads people to His Son through it.

And God is sovereign over our financial resources. I was introduced to another observation of God’s sovereignty and provision this past week; at both Wednesday in the Word and during our staff meeting. I must admit I had never heard this detail until now; but it’s a good one. Not only did the gifts from wise men symbolically point to Jesus’ identity and future sacrifice, but they also provided Mary and Joseph with the necessary “capital” to travel to Egypt and remain there until it was safe to come home. Bus fare that far south wasn’t cheap; and housing in Egypt may have been on par with Denver’s market. But thank God, He is sovereign over our financial resources and will use them to lead people to Jesus.

In all of this, God providentially ensures the safety of His One and Only Son, sent to make a way for everyone – young and old, benevolent and violent – and to do the one thing we can never do for ourselves: provide forgiveness, salvation, and an ever-lasting Kingdom. As is predictable, many will be threatened by His everlasting Kingdom and oppose Him – passively or, like Herod, aggressively. WE may even unknowingly imitate Herod in subtle and Church-sanctioned ways as we attempt to keep our little kingdoms alive.

It’s not just the Herods of the world who fight against Christ. We also do **Unthinkable Violence** to ourselves and others. We sin and fall short of the glory of God. We, too, kill the souls and dreams of others.

But as bad as we’ve made things, God has accomplished the **Unthinkable Victory**, through His Son. The Good News of Christmas is that, in the end, God will have His way – with the world, and His Church.

And as we come to the Table this morning to celebrate the sacrifice of Christ, we are reminded that though Jesus avoided death at His birth – and the maniacal wishes of a jealous king – He did not avoid the kings and rulers of Jerusalem some three decades later. But this was the sovereign plan of God: to rescue us from our sin . . . NO MATTER THE COST! Gold, frankincense, and myrrh were the gifts brought to Jesus. But Jesus is God’s gift brought to us.