



January 4, 2009

Preaching: Rev. Ronni Verboom

Matthew 2:1-12

“A Tale of Two Kings”

Happy New Year! It's 2009. And this Sunday we gather to remember the visit of the wise men to the child Jesus-to celebrate Epiphany. The actual observance date is next Tuesday, Jan. 6th, but we're getting an early start.

The whole thing started back in the 4th century, when Epiphany became a festival of the church. In a number of countries it's celebrated with special meals and activities. In France, for example, a special cake is baked in households with children. A dried bean is put in the batter and baked in the cake. The child who gets the bean in their piece of cake is “king” or “queen” for that day, and wears a paper crown. He or she also picks another child to rule with them- a king picks a queen, and a queen picks a king.

We're not going to do anything so elaborate today, but it's worth our while to think a bit about the Scriptures for Epiphany. What truths are here to guide us into the new year?

You may have noticed our theme, “A Tale of Two Kings”, and figured either I or the church secretary really goofed up big time. Baby Jesus was visited by THREE kings, wasn't he? What does the gospel of Matthew tell us?

Nowhere in Scripture are the wise men numbered. We don't know how many there were. Also, they were not ever described as **KINGS**. They were probably Chaldean astrologers- scholars, not political rulers. Garrison Keillor, of Lake Wobegone fame, in his re-telling of the Christmas story, likens the shepherds to parking lot attendants, and the wise men to university professors. He may be a lot closer to the truth than our traditional ideas!

There's a good possibility the wise men didn't arrive precisely on the night Jesus was born, either. Scripture tells us they saw the CHILD with Mary, his mother, and they went into the HOUSE and worshipped him. It's likely that Mary and Joseph stayed some time in Bethlehem before being warned to flee to Egypt, and that they had found a house of some kind to live in, rather than remaining stuck outside with the animals in the barn.

What IS certain, is that the wise men were so intrigued by the vision of the star, that they were willing to undertake an arduous and lengthy journey to see this child. They were also certainly very wealthy, and willing to sacrifice significant sums to finance their travels, and to honor this special child of God with precious gifts. Their willingness to sacrifice and give to Christ is a model for us, in our relating to the Son of God. This is one of the themes of Epiphany.

OK, so this is helpful, and gives us a clearer picture of these events early in the life of Christ—but what about the theme title: “A Tale of Two Kings”? The first two verses of our Scripture name them: *After Jesus was born In Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of KING HEROD, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the one who has been born KING OF THE JEWS? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.”*

These are the two kings: Jesus, the king, born during the reign of Herod, the king. The wise men's visit was only one event in the greater story of these two kings. What does this greater story teach us?

Herod was half Jewish, and had served as an officer in the Roman army. That's like being an American working for Al Qaeda. His reward for co-operation with the Romans was the gift of Palestine as his kingdom. He used intrigue and ruthless power to get to his position. What a shock, then, to be visited by Chaldean scholars who asked him if he knew anything about a child, who was born to be “king of the Jews”. Herod seethed with a steely, murderous resolve to crush that possibility immediately.

Herod's threat to the Christ child was perceived by the wise men, and later by Joseph, through messages from God spoken in their dreams. Herod the King did NOT destroy Jesus the King. The Holy Family fled to Egypt.

But Herod did TRY to destroy him. The “slaughter of the innocents” is a chapter in the Christmas story. (Read Mt. 2:16) We don't include this part of the Christmas story anywhere in our yearly holiday observance. But it happened. And we need to remember. Herod had all the male children of Bethlehem and surrounding areas killed, little boys aged two or younger. Murdered.

What do we learn from this story?

First, don't underestimate the power of evil in the world- the destructive forces within and around us.

We LOVE the Christmas story—the tender scene of the gentle mother, of loving Joseph, of the tiny babe. We feel the warmth of the shelter of the stable. We sing “Silent Night” in the yellow glow of candles and imagine soft firelight glowing in the stable so long ago. We forget that this holy child was hardly born before there was a price on his head. We forget the darkness surrounding the stable. We forget the streets of Bethlehem rang with the shouts of soldiers and echoed to the thud of tramping boots so soon after that holy birth. We forget the cries of the mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters of the poor murdered children.

We need to let this story remind us that the world still holds Herod. There are many forces lined up against the ways of God's love and grace in the world. Just pick up a magazine or newspaper and you will read about today's murdered children. In urban war zones across the world and in urban war zones of our nation. In today's Bethlehem, and in America's suburban homes and schools.

We, in the church, need to remember Herod. We need to remember he is there and he is powerful. Destructive forces ARE arrayed against the ways of God's love and grace in the world.

The second thing to learn from this story of the two kings-

We must consider what God wants us to do about Herod. God does not leave us alone to face the Herods of this world. He sends messages to us, calls to us, whispers in our dreams, telling us which paths to follow, where to place our feet. As he did this for the wise men long ago, and for Joseph, Mary and the baby Jesus, he will do it for us.

We need to ask God, what should I do about Herod? We have to make this a **SERIOUS AND HIGH PRIORITY** for living a life of faith. We can't just assume common sense and popular wisdom will be all we need. Prayer, study, discussion, worship--- these are not just nice little boosts for our lives—they are **ESSENTIAL** work for God's ultimate triumph over sin and death. Herod rages on—and our ignorance and apathy sometimes help him do so. We cannot stand against Herod without God's help and wisdom. Our thoughts, our dreams, our feelings are important---- but they are important because through them **GOD** speaks, and pushes us forward to risk new ways of living, speaking, and acting.

Our churches need to be places of nurture and renewal for our weary bodies and spirits. But they also need to be places that trouble our complacency and call us to action that resists Herod and defends suffering victims. We need to seek out God, for both of these things--- moments of calm and moments of being troubled.

How can both of these things happen? We can find a moment in our busy days to just sit quietly by a fire, or relax as we listen to music. Invite God into those moments with you. Listen for his voice in your thoughts. Feel the power of his love and might. We don't intentionally spend such quiet moments with God often enough.

It isn't all that difficult to experience moments of being troubled. A glance at a newspaper can reveal the presence of Herod in our world. I once was captured by a photo of an American serviceman cradling the bloodied body of an Iraqi child. I turned the pages to the article, hoping to learn about them both—was the soldier able to help the child? Did the toddler survive? Did he have family to care for him? How is the soldier doing in this tragic mess? The article offered no answers to any of these questions. And friends, troubled though I was, I believe I needed that moment. We don't intentionally spend such troubling moments with God often enough.

God knows we need soothing. But God knows we also need to be challenged. God expects us to spend ourselves for one of these kings, Christ the King- and to resist the other- Herod the King. We are called to share resources of time, money, spoken words, even committed voting.

There are many ways our church and congregation oppose Herod: we give both time and money to emergency aid assistance, through the local food pantry and Lazarus House- which shelters the homeless. We support World Relief Refugee resettlement ministry, mission trips, projects and missionaries- both in the U.S. and abroad. In the Christmas season we prepare shoe boxes of delights for children far away; we buy gifts for Christmas Angels who are in need. We can celebrate the ways we ARE standing up for Christ against Herod. But there will always be MORE WAYS that God intends for us to support the suffering victims of earthly powers. We MUST keep our eyes, ears and hearts open to his call.

I have seen all three films in the “Lord of the Rings” trilogy. I first read Tolkien's books at the age of 18, then again a second time about 16 years later, and recently a third time another 16 or so years still later. I have always been captivated by this story of the battle between darkness and light, good and evil.

There are many battles depicted in the films (amazing scenes of battle). The story is not without violence. But violence does not save the day. Evil is not crushed by violence. Evil is destroyed by two little hobbits (small, insignificant creatures) who willingly risk torture and death traveling into the very heart of evil itself. They go, because the only way to overcome evil is to cast it back into itself. It cannot be crushed by violence. The armies of their friends buy them time to complete their task. That's all they can do. And they do succeed. They cast the ring of power into the fires that produced it, and the ring is destroyed. It is when evil is cast back into itself that the armies of evil disappear- like dust in the wind.

The King, in this fantasy story, is one who understands what the King of Kings has shown us: the powers of evil cannot be destroyed by wielding that same kind of power. They can only be destroyed by steadfastly upholding the good and resisting the lure of evil, in order to allow evil to destroy itself.

The good news of the Bible's Tale of Two Kings, is that Herod, for all his destructive power, is ultimately powerless over the true King, Jesus Christ. Herod still has power. Herod is still within our world, and, to be honest, even within our own hearts at times. Herod is present in all nations and all human assemblies. We will meet Herod again and again in this life. But God's ways are not the world's ways. God's ways of love, that seem so fragile, like the eggshell thin skull of a newborn baby, God's ways are not easily crushed. Even DEATH cannot overcome God's powers of love and life.

We in the church are called to remember, to trust and proclaim: **OUR KING WIELDS THE ULTIMATE POWER: THE POWER OF LOVE.** This power is the strongest thing in the universe. Love is the power above all powers that have ever been or ever will be. This is what we believe. Now, in 2009, we are to go forth and live out that belief. We go to serve **CHRIST**, not **HEROD**. How will that take shape in the year ahead? May we repeatedly and humbly turn to Christ that he might show us the way.