

Second Sunday after Christmas Day

JEREMIAH 31:7-14

SIRACH 24:1-12

PSALM 147:12-20

WISDOM OF SOLOMON 10:15-21

EPHESIANS 1:3-14

JOHN 1:(1-9), 10-18

Epiphany of Our Lord (The Manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles)

ISAIAH 60:1-6

PSALM 72:1-7, 10-14

EPHESIANS 3:1-12

MATTHEW 2:1-12

January 5, 2025

***Running from the Dark! Running to the Light!***

**King of Judea! King of the Jews!** These were two of perhaps many titles bestowed upon Herod, AKA, Herod the Great, the wicked ruler who reigned over all Israel under the brutal auspices of Rome, the Roman juggernaut a merciless imperial occupier to whom Herod swore allegiance as he dutifully licked the boot of his superiors, including the emperor Octavius, a total autocrat, an authoritarian dictator, called Caesar Augustus. Enlightened by the beautifully poetic prose in the prologue of the Gospel of John, one of the lectionary readings prescribed for this the Second Sunday after Christmas Day, we are told that there was a man who was sent from God. His assignment was to be a harbinger of his cousin, this Essene and fiery zealot proclaiming the good news of one who would also eventually be proclaimed as King of the Jews. As we know from our reading, the Gospels tell us that an epitaph was intriguingly placed above Jesus' head on his cross at his crucifixion, no doubt intended as a sarcastic taunt acclaiming that this peasant reformer was indeed the King of the Jews. Oh, what a sermon that real-time headstone preached! Despite his best efforts to deny, defer, and deflect, all Jesus' protestations to the contrary as he went about his life and ministry. After his death and resurrection, a plethora of grandiose titles were bestowed upon Jesus by his followers, many of these titles traditionally, yes, solely reserved for the Caesar in power. Yes, these flattering adjectives describing the rabbi firmly stuck, each one a commentary preaching sermons all their own.

While refusing to embrace the many messianic titles thrust upon him, all manner of praise gloriously heaped upon the man from Nazareth, including being called the Christ, the very Son of God, Jesus' devout followers truly believed, as have millions since, that indeed this Galilean

deserved, warranted every one of these divine labels. Indeed, today we read a tale of two persons in Herod and Jesus, as strangely, yes, ironically, inseparable as are their radically divergent stories framed at this time tumultuous in history. The contrasts between these unlikely and unwitting rivals separated by birth and death are monumental to the max, magnified by the fact that they do overlap, at least for part of a year, as we view them from our perspective of the rearview mirror. The lifestyles of Herod and Jesus reveal extreme dichotomies of being, of human being, far more than style, revealing the radical polarities that extend to the end of whatever limits define the breadth and depth defines or encompasses our humanity. Their legacies, representing a heritage of extremes, fully illustrate the seemingly unlimited capacity inherent in our creative abilities, stretching the bounds of whatever expands the universe might ever hold for the human creature, whatever the unimaginable limits of space might ever somehow contain or confine the depth and breadth, the expansive scope, of human being and doing. **These two figures, joined at the hip by history, their lives intersecting but never converging, a significant part of their stories intertwined in perpetuity, Herod and Jesus represent ultimate case studies characterizing the unlimited possibility, the limitless potential, driving the motives of the human creature, every modus operundi attached to the largesse of our human being or doing, whether those countless thoughts and actions be for good or for ill.**

**Today, as we begin a new calendar year together celebrating Epiphany on this Second Sunday after Christmas Day, liturgical correctness intended, we are confronted with an optic that compels us, almost forcing us, to compare and contrast light and dark, to which there is no comparison, every comparison. Perhaps the biggest irony driving my writing this sermon is the fact that I have been pondering these images for well more than a week. Nothing new there except, except then came the events of New Orleans and Las Vegas and this immediately became a sermon of specifics, not generalities, sermons always at risk of falling victim to random themes or vague topics. As I read once again some background material about Herod, I was quickly reminded of just what a true villain in every way imaginable this sycophant was according to Matthew. I only mention the timing of my consideration of this idea in light of the darkness that has been visited upon society once again as the old year gave way to the new, bringing a host of negative, horrific, images to the forefront of our attention. Once more in what seems to be an endless assault, we are forced to experience darkness in all its worst forms, living and reliving the unimaginable potential born of twisted, mentally compromised, individuals. As the ancient writer draws imagery from the first creation story in Genesis, the Johannine word crafter also pondered the extreme diametric associated with light and dark, declaring about John the Baptist, a latter day prophet who looked like a replica, amazingly resembling the throwbacks of old, who came bearing witness, a prophecy testifying to the light, that though he was not that light that indeed he could see the light, that though still shining in the distance, was a light soon to be fully revealed, a light that would illumine all humanity. Yes, John foretold of a bright light, a**

**light, the light, of the world, coming at the warp speed of light while slowly gestating in the womb. The sad indictment was that the world could only see darkness and frequently chose darkness. As we enter fully what the composer of the haunting carol poetically described as the “bleak midwinter”, every day cloaked with all the dull and dreary imagery associated with this long, cold, season, we have been poignantly reminded of the darkness that still has the amazing capacity to do its damage, to wreak havoc on a society longing for hope and peace, the light of God shining upon us all until all our swords are beaten into plowshares and the lion and the lamb lie down together in peaceful harmony, pipe dream, wishful thinking, on steroids.**

Perhaps the painful lesson that the writer of Matthew soberly wants to subtly remind us, is that the Herods of the world will always be with us. There are always those who seek the demise of the innocents. After all, it was Herod who ordered, in fits of tyrannical rage, the murder of his wife Mariamme, known as Mariamme I, and three of his nine sons, Alexander and Aristobulus in 7 BCE and Antipater in 4 BCE, these orders carried out at the height of Herod’s insecurity and insanity. All these demonic actions carried out in this tyrant’s lust to consolidate power, all driven by his innate fear of competition fueled by an extreme narcissistic personality disorder that was exacerbated by a rancid and rampant paranoia, facts of history probably leading to the biblical mythology in the Gospel of Matthew describing the slaughter of male babies in Bethlehem at the time of the birth of Jesus. An interesting dynamic associated with the reign and rule driving the irrationally deranged monarch was that this despot was known as a great builder, undertaking colossal projects, leaving behind a legacy of massive monuments to his reign, including an expansion of the Temple Mount, doubling its size. Even in the midst of utter darkness there appeared to be a ray of light, nothing exciting in that caveat, that footnote of history. And no, I am not suggesting that these are equivalent in any way, that the worst level of evil perpetrated by an individual can somehow be balanced by good, an argument that has been made in recent years describing the wicked nature of perhaps the vilest man in history.

**We see the Herods of the world taking on so many forms, their personas seemingly countless, a ubiquitous presence unraveling the hope of a desperately desired civil society, all humanity learning to live in harmony, in peace and prosperity. These kinds of vicious acts, cruelty caused by so many known and unknown factors and forces unfortunately reveal the minimal prospects of creating a truly global village, even a facsimile of a utopian world. The outlook always seems bleak, the prayers for eradication not so great, always seemingly beyond our grasp.** We saw it up close and personal in New Orleans in a domestic terror attack attributed to ISIS, once again religion gone awry, revealing the danger of becoming a zealot based on the irrational passions inherent with any religious zeal. We saw it on the same day in Las Vegas, evidently manifest by a Green Beret suffering with the serious psychoses found in the traumatic horrors of PTSD, the tapes in his head becoming louder and more vivid until he

reached his point of no return. Both men were military veterans, a frightening prospect. We have seen these kinds of attacks taking place all around the world in recent weeks, in Germany and in other locales. **There is nothing new here, nothing new to see, sadly nothing new to experience, these horrific events no longer a surprise must less a shock, now considered commonplace, routine, ordinary, expected. And while we must acknowledge the disgusting presence that all manner of wickedness brings, manifesting evil in every form, it is still most unwelcome company to say the least. We cannot spend our precious time emphasizing, much less obsessing, on those who seek destruction and death, the dis-ease of humankind. Rather, we must consider those who bring light to the world, those whose goals and objectives are to make this planet a better place to live. Yes, it sounds so Pollyanna, but what else would you have the preacher to say?**

**And yet, after all that has been said this morning, perhaps we need some better language describing the antithesis of light, for darkness in and of itself is not at all a bad thing, but rather is an element essential to our survival, a necessity for even the most basic level of thriving as divine creation, human or otherwise. After all, it was God who separated light from dark as a part of the creative process and not only called it good, but very good. We need darkness for the biorhythms of life, to maintain the circadian cycles that are so necessary for our health and wellbeing. And it is only amidst the darkness that we have the capacity, that we are able to see the light. Today we read the wonderfully fanciful story of the wise men, those magical, mystical, magi who traveled to Bethlehem to pay homage to one who would be called king, bringing with them gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. The only GPS guiding them was a floating star that appeared to move across the eastern sky, the radiant light of this gaseous sphere giving them the directional latitude and longitude, they needed to arrive at their destination. Without the clarity of a clear night sky, the whole scenario never happens, the clouds above hiding any chance that these ancient astrologer star gazers would know where to go to see this great sight. Sadly, it is against the darkness perpetrated by so many throughout history that we recall with much gratitude those who have brought light, those who bring light. Wish it were not so, but it is so true! For those of us who choose to follow the pathway of Jesus, yes, the very light of the world, the rabbi from Nazareth serves as our pattern for living, indeed a star guiding us as we seek to bring light amidst the darkness that so often seems to prevail. Yes, darkness takes on many forms, while the light always shines its brightest path. May all of us become an embodiment of light in the world, our own incarnational star shining brightly for all the world to see.**

**In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, and gives us light in the midst of darkness, and vice versa! Amen and amen!**