

Sermon on Matthew Chapter 2

The minute Jesus is born, things get complicated.

The Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 2, which we just heard, begins with a tale of political intrigue. A group of wise men from the East who have foreseen the birth of a great king, pay a visit to King Herod, in Judea. They innocently ask King Herod, who should theoretically know everything that's going on in his realm: "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?"

In spite of all their careful calculations, though, the wise men from the East could never have predicted Herod's reaction to that question. They probably expected him to rejoice. They might have thought he would be glad that a worthy successor to his great kingship had been chosen by God.

But Herod reacts instead with something that has driven his entire ascent to power over the course of his lifetime – fear.

Herod was born and raised in the pressure cooker of political tension and power struggles. His father, a high-ranking official in the Roman hierarchy, had been assassinated by poisoning. His family's rule as tetrarchs of Judea had been overthrown and he was forced to flee to Rome. After he was nominated to be king of Judea by his friends in Rome, and then had captured the throne forcefully from the Hasmonean dynasty, he was resented by the people he ruled, and seen merely as a puppet of the Roman oppressors. His family had never fit in with devout Jews because they were Edomites whose ancestors had converted to the faith. He was regarded as a foreigner - unfit to be king. The Sanhedrin regularly condemned his brutality, and they were appalled at his family's unfaithfulness to strict Jewish laws.

Even in spite of his attempts to assert his greatness through expanding the territories of Judea and undertaking massive building projects including the Second Temple, Herod's power, at every turn, was tenuous and he was in constant danger of being overthrown.

Fearful, insecure leaders destroy their enemies instead of building alliances because they trust no one. Herod had exiled his first wife and his oldest child, and he had his second wife executed along with three of his sons, his brother-in-law, his wife's father and mother among many others. Anyone who threatened his power was eliminated.

The title "The King of the Jews" had been given to Herod by the Romans, and he had no intention of handing it over peacefully to someone these foreigners from the East were calling the King of the Jews. The text says he became frightened, or troubled. He consulted with his priests and scribes and they increased his fear by telling him the prophet Micah had predicted that a king would come out of Bethlehem to rule over the people.

King Herod, though, didn't seem to be very intelligent. He asked the wise men to go and find the child, then come back and tell him where this infant King of the Jews was so that he himself could go and pay tribute. Bethlehem was only 6 miles south of Jerusalem, and it seems that Herod would have sent some soldiers or officials with the wise men to see where the child was born, but thanks be to God – he didn't. Instead an angel warned the wise men not to return to Herod after finding the newborn king so they found Jesus, paid him kingly tribute, and went home another way.

And then the story of Matthew, Chapter 2 shifts from the court of a king to the lives of those who are so frequently harmed by the self-serving intrigues of fearful, powerful people: the innocent. Our innocent savior, Jesus, has to be quickly spirited away to Egypt to avoid being murdered by Herod. All the other male children under the age of 2 in Bethlehem are brutally murdered by Herod's men. It is the innocent who suffer, and that is the greatest cost of all.

One of the ministries that my Community, the Community of St. John Baptist, supports is the Good Shepherd Home for Children in Cameroon, West Africa. It is a sanctuary for the innocent.

There are usually between 100 and 150 children there at any given time. Some are found as newborn infants after they were abandoned by parents too poor to care for them. Some were purposefully abandoned by their parents because they were born with AIDS. Some come to the Home as older children after their parents have died or disappeared. The children are always at risk of being kidnapped or trafficked, so they are not eligible for adoption. Instead, they grow up at the Home and consider all the other children to be their brothers and sisters. For 20 years they all called the Home's founder, Sister Jane Mankaa, their mother. Sister Jane died in April of 2021, but the work of the Good Shepherd Home continues through the generosity of people like you. The Good Shepherd Home was named after this congregation because this was the first church that decided to take a chance and sponsor the work of Sister Jane. Her mission to protect the innocent from harm, and help them realize their potential, has saved hundreds of lives.

This particular story from the Gospel of Matthew speaks to us on many different levels. It tells of the fulfillment of the prophets' messages of a messiah, born in Bethlehem. It speaks of an infant worshiped as a king and given kingly tributes of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. It also reminds us, in this modern age, to remember the cost of fear. Fear of losing power leads to the destruction of perceived enemies and threats. Fear of scarcity leads to greed and corruption. Fear of the Other the foreigner leads to war and murder, and fear also causes the destruction of our selves when we are too afraid to speak our truth. Fear is the enemy, which leads us to destruction.

In this story, innocents were destroyed by King Herod's fear of losing his throne. In Cameroon, the innocents are destroyed by the ongoing civil war and the vast, seemingly impenetrable web of corruption and crime brought about by poverty and exploitation.

But also in the midst of this story, and in our modern story, is our messiah. A helpless baby born humble and poor who reminds us to include the innocent in every story. In the midst of fear and destruction is Christ, our miraculous and wonderful hope.

Thank you for remembering our innocents in Cameroon. It is only because of people like you, and Sister Jane Mankaa, that they have love, faith, and hope.