

Two Men and a Baby
First Sunday after Christmas
New Year's Day Service
January 1, 2017
Gordon Wiersma

Text: Isaiah 63 & Matthew 2

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson – Matthew 2:13-23

This is from the book “Cloth in the Cradle” – a creative collection of Christmas resources from the Iona Christian Community in Scotland – it’s called “Putting Herod Back Into Christmas”, written by Liz Gibson: *We talk about putting Christ back into Christmas. We need to put Herod back into Christmas. Far from spoiling the image, the Christmas story actually makes much more sense if we include unpleasant aspects. Perhaps it’s because we don’t want to upset the children, because we want to shield them. But lots of bad things happen and children know about them. To include in the Christmas story the slaughter of the innocents serves to show that Jesus was born into the real world. Horrible though it was, it’s no worse than many things that happen today. When we question God’s whereabouts & intentions in the catastrophes of this life, there are no easy answers. The Christmas story is fantastic, but it is not fantasy. It’s fantastic because of the good news that God became human. We turn it into fantasy if we make it cozy & nice and avoid the uncomfortable bits. Cozy and nice is fine for a short while; it refreshes and relaxes us, but the good news is God in the midst of the light and the darkness, giving us strength and hope for the long haul of life.*

After that eloquent reflection from Cloth in the Cradle, what I now want you to think about is Batman! And not the Batman of the many, many more recent movies, but the old TV show, Batman, from the 1960s. You may be too old or too young to have watched Batman – although I imagine you can still find it somewhere on cable or the interweb these days. I watched it - sometimes – although not very often because my parents didn’t approve of it – but if they were gone at just the right time, it was Batman time! (A side note to children and youth – don’t be like Pastor Gordon - you should only watch what your parents approve of – got

that?) Anyway, part of what was so enjoyable about Batman was that watching the show good and bad were so clear to see: Batman was good, all good – and so were most of the other folks – all the good citizens of Gotham city - and Robin - he was good too – all good. But then there were the villains – and they were bad – all bad; the Penguin and the Joker – bad guys – bad to the core. So not only was it very entertaining to watch Batman – the corny costumes and dialogue; the violence – whack! slam! crack! kappow!; the dastardly villains; the Batmobile; and Batman always winning by the end of the half hour – but it was also enjoyable because you didn't have to think one little bit – you knew exactly who was good, and exactly who was bad, and everything else fell into place. It was mindless educational entertainment: you learned that good was, good; and bad was, bad.

When you are trying to make sense of something – of a story, of a person, of an event – or even trying to make sense of life in general– the ‘classic Batman approach’ can be very useful: you just have to know who or what is good, and who or what is bad. Once you know that, the rest is easy – you don't have to think much: you simply fall in line with what is good, and you reject the bad. Good – bad: it's a very efficient, useful, effective, way to look at things.

And it is in fact, one way to look at this story of Herod and Joseph – who is good and who is bad. Turns out it is not the way I am going to recommend that we look at this story! – but I want us to appreciate just how inviting and effective an approach it is. Because it is so obviously there for the seeing and the taking in this story. How much more bad can someone be than Herod? – a ruler who uses his power to take the lives of little children, killing these little ones and crushing the hearts of their mothers – putting Herod back into Christmas places a very bad person in our midst – he is worse and worst. How much more good can someone be than Joseph? - taking in Mary in questionable circumstances, open to the Spirit's guidance in his dreams, fleeing from their homeland to protect the child and mother, Jesus and Mary – Joseph is as good as good gets – he is better and best.

And if that's how we look at the story, what's so convenient is that then we're pretty much done, because the lesson is clear: don't be bad, like Herod was; be good, like Joseph was. Amen. Clear – useful - efficient – we could be done! - but...think about this for a moment. Are you as bad as Herod was? – I hope not. Are you as good as Joseph was? – well, there's not really another opportunity for having the Messiah in your household! So in a peculiar way this bad/good approach keeps our lives at a distance from this story: 'I'm not as bad as Herod...can't really be as good as Joseph – so I guess I'm doing OK' – no need to reflect further. And instead we can focus our energy on others, keeping on the lookout to determine who is good and who is bad as we go through life. There is a long track record of that approach to faith: good – bad - Amen. Or good – bad – Amen. You decide!

But...let's try something different. Just for a moment, let's put aside just how bad Herod is and just how good Joseph is – put aside how different they are, and look at the story this way: as being about two men who were both afraid – a story about two people facing fear. Perhaps that sounds intriguing to you – or perhaps it sounds like I am moving into some lame pop psychology – but just stay with me and see where this approach might lead. Because what seems clear to me is that if we take fear as our starting point, then we are immediately much closer to this story. Bad people and good people might be out there, but we are familiar in here, in our hearts, with fear.

The circumstances of this story are certainly very different from ours, but we do know about fear. In fact, we are told every day to be afraid – if you haven't heard that, then you haven't been paying attention – so I'll tell you: be afraid. Our president-elect says to be afraid of terrorism and immigrants; others say to be afraid of our president-elect. Our president-elect says to be afraid of economic decline; others say to be afraid of destroying our planet. On a broad scale there's plenty to be afraid about – and I imagine your mind and heart and soul holds, or is held, by such fears at times. Not that there's not enough in your own little life to occupy the space of fear – places in our own lives that frighten us, our fears for those we love and care about. A story about being afraid is relevant, and global, and personal.

But wait a minute, what about this story – Herod, afraid? What’s Herod got to be afraid of? Have you ever heard a poem about Herod? – well, here’s one, written in Herod’s voice:

*O I promised them! I spoke those
magi sweet.
I spilled soft words upon their ears
Saying nothing of my private fears.
I said, “You must journey on and
greet
This newborn king, and then must
journey back again
And bring me news, that I may also
go and worship him.*

*Who gave the game away? How did
they know?
How could they guess? From what
source did they learn?
Whatever happened, they did not
return;
There was no information, nothing to
show.
And no address. A pity – the damage
could have been less.
As it was, I’m afraid, we made a
bloody mess.*

*I sent my soldiers out with orders to,
well, kill
All male children up to two years
old.
I know such actions make me seem
quite cold.
But I’m a king, I’ve a duty to fulfill;
You have to see, it’s a matter of
national security.
And I can’t allow a child to grow to
rival me.*

*It’s only little people with their little
lives
That can afford to take a moral
stand.
I have to think what’s best for all this
land.
So, yes, there were some unimportant
Hebrew wives
That wept and wailed for their
Hebrew males.
But what matters is MY place is
unassailed.*

From Cloth in the Cradle

Herod is afraid: afraid of losing power – afraid of losing control. I am not speaking to justify his actions. I am saying that fear is strong and deadly. Fear fuels the endless appetite of rulers and nations to consume lives in its wake.

And what about Joseph? – that good Joseph. Before we crown him a saint without him even asking us to, we need to know that Joseph is not only good, he is also afraid. Afraid in

the fraught circumstances of Mary and this child; afraid of Herod's threat to their lives and to his own. He is a man on the run in a world of fear.

Two men – two human beings – both afraid – the same. What's different? Throughout the stories of Jesus' birth, in Matthew and Luke both, there is the refrain of "don't be afraid" from God's messenger– to Mary and the shepherds and Joseph – messengers of God say: "don't be afraid." Well, I think that's impossible to not be afraid! What I have come to hear whenever I hear "don't be afraid" in scripture is this: 'I know you are afraid, but listen to something different; don't have fear at the center of you, trust God at the center.' Which means that when it comes down to it, I think the story of Herod and Joseph is less about good and bad, and more about listening.

I believe that all day every day, that all Herod listened to was his fears. He nurtured his fears, let them fester and grow. A life of listening to fear, for a person, a ruler, a nation, is an insidious soundtrack. And the violence of what it can lead to is right here in this story.

Joseph could hear his fears – perhaps all day every day too. But he tried to, was able to, listen to something else too - something deeper and stronger: your life is held by God, you are not alone, you can act with courage. That led him in a direction of life, and led him to believe there could be a different soundtrack for the world than fear.

So it seems to me that if we come to see this story as less about bad and good and more about fear and listening, that what it actually draws out in us first is compassion. Can we have compassion for leaders, and how hard it is for them to step outside of fear? Can we certainly have compassion for people in desperate circumstances, afraid for their families, and the desperate actions that emerge from such fear? Can we even have compassion on terrorists – on our enemies – on those who peddle and profit from fear? Could we first see how afraid everyone is? – and how hard it is to step outside that fear and listen to something else?

Fear looms so large in our world. So maybe with Joseph, we can at least get a handle on the possibility, the chance, of fear being put aside from the center. Joseph isn't a king – he's just a person who has to figure out what to do in his life. It's never easy - Joseph's life was

connected to Mary and now this baby. There was plenty to fear – but Joseph listens in a way that draws on courage rather than fear. Perhaps that is the only place to start – with what each person will do - realizing that it is in each person that the mystery of fear and faith is played out. And when we see it in Joseph, it begins to seem possible elsewhere – perhaps in us – perhaps everywhere. It begins to be possible in our lives to witness to the world, its leaders, its people, that fear is not the way.

It does no good to say we are not afraid. But the mystery of faith is that the fear in our world, our lives, is encountered by the sign of Immanuel – by a baby – the reality of God with us. In our fears, God grant us the faith to listen to that story, and from it draw the courage to believe that fear need not direct lives, or leaders, or nations. Thanks be to God. AMEN.