

Sermon: Year A, Feast of the Epiphany  
Texts: Isaiah 60:1-6,9  
Ephesians 3:1-12  
Matthew 2:1-12

The familiarity of the story just read from Matthew's Gospel can easily hide an important disadvantage we share in trying to understand it. We ourselves have almost no actual experience of either kings or sages. They are for us more the stuff of folklore than of history. Kings may still be the titular heads of state, but they no longer wield the divine right of power. And sages have fallen to the morass of the innumerable talking heads that sweep away thought in avalanches of talk, spouting opinions on every imaginable topic. Yet there was a time, not so distant, when by their rule and their wisdom such persons could shake the world instead of merely entertaining it. It might do us well, then, to be reminded of what formerly could have been at stake when true kings and sages met.

Most of us know the opening sentences of the Declaration of Independence, the one or two phrases most quoted, regarding freedom and liberty and the pursuit of happiness. But the vast majority of that document says nothing about how these might be envisioned or accomplished. It is rather a long and spirited list of grievances suffered by real persons in real time, addressed to a real king who showed little interest in answering the complaints of such inconsequential colonists. (Collateral damage may be a new term but it's a very old concept). If you've forgotten what was written, here is a short sampling and a testimony to human royalty:

"The history of the present King of Great Britain," Thomas Jefferson wrote, "is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States. To prove this, let Facts be submitted to a candid world.

He has refused his Assent to Laws, the most wholesome and necessary for the public good.

He has forbidden his Governors to pass Laws of immediate and pressing importance...

He has called together legislative bodies at places unusual [and] uncomfortable... for the sole purpose of fatiguing them into compliance with his measures.

He has dissolved Representative Houses repeatedly, for opposing with manly firmness his invasions on the rights of the people...

He has made Judges dependent on his Will alone for the tenure of their offices...

He has... sent hither swarms of Officers to harass our people and eat out their substance.

He has combined with others to subject us to a jurisdiction foreign to our constitution, and unacknowledged by our laws...

For quartering large bodies of armed troops among us:

For protecting them, by a mock Trial from punishment for any Murders which they should commit on the Inhabitants of these States:

For cutting off our Trade with all parts of the world:...

For depriving us in many cases, of the benefit of Trial by Jury:

For transporting us beyond Seas to be tried for pretended offences...

He has abdicated Government here, by declaring us out of his Protection and waging War against us.

He has plundered our seas, ravaged our coasts, burnt our towns, and destroyed the lives of our people.

He is at this time transporting large Armies of foreign Mercenaries to compleat the works of death, desolation, and tyranny, already begun with circumstances of Cruelty & Perfidy scarcely paralleled in the most barbarous ages, and totally unworthy the Head of a civilized nation.

In every stage of these Oppressions We have Petitioned for Redress in the most humble terms: Our repeated Petitions have been answered only by repeated injury. A Prince, whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people.”

This is the milieu of kings, for every ounce of gold, a pint of blood. And when John Hancock and 53 others signed their names at the bottom of the page, it was not with joy and gladness and songs of mirth, but with the solemnity and fear that stems from knowing the true severity of their actions, which, as they noted, demanded the pledge of their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor.

This, too, was the milieu of Herod, and his own actions in his own time were no less grievous and no less brutal. Herod had no compunction about the use of force and he knew the efficacy of violence. And if he proved just a bit hesitant in his repression, the Romans were more than willing to step in with a heavier hand. This was no position for the faint of heart.

So let's get clear on a number of popular misconceptions. When the sages visited the king, they were not lost tourists, eager for directions, who, quite by happenstance, sought out the highest authority of the land. They arrived at Herod's palace with deeply unsettling news. Herod's reign was ending, and they were looking for the one who would establish an entirely different legacy upheld by an entirely different legitimacy. Their desire was not to bring gifts, shiny packages that might surprise and delight. Their intent was to offer their worship and, in so doing, to recognize the supreme authority of this new king over all others who claimed any position and power.

They had come following a star, a new light in the sky that had not been seen before. This was not for lack of a better means of announcement. It was, in fact, an announcement without equal. For the stars of the sky were the very measure of constancy, the closest approximations of eternity available within creation, which, when all else in the turbulent world fell to chaos, proved ever dependable as that which moved but did not change. They were the very substance of stability, invulnerable, no matter how destructive or dismaying the events of humankind or nature itself. A new light appearing was not a fluke or a point of passing interest. It signified, rather, the disruption of all the things that were taken most for granted or suffered with the most profound resignation. Eternity had pierced the heavens. In the vast reaches of distant space a star emerged that seemed to shine with particular focus, in its way declaring that in someone, frail and newly born, God himself would undo all that seemed hopelessly fated and tragically determined.

And when the sages left Bethlehem, we are told, they returned to their own country “by another way.” The phrase is beautifully abstract and open. Yes, it can be understood that they did not travel back along the same route, retracing their steps. They didn’t report to Herod as he had requested of them. Yet more than this, the sages chose not to return to the same form of life. They felt no compunction now to be players within the harsh game of regional politics. They had no need to try to unseat Herod or make public his false standing. They had found a king, but he was one who dispelled everything that kingship had come to represent, the tireless matching of envy with fear and glory with terror. They had, instead, witnessed someone who showed power in an infinitely alternative incarnation, who was, himself, the better way home. Herod and all that he represented had been wholly discredited.

Of course, this is as far as we like to read in this story. It leaves us the option of remembering only a quaint tableau, of stable visitors, the last to arrive, kindly and benign. But Matthew told us this story to mark something much more fierce and dramatic. Herod did not disappear or cease from his ways. Frustrated and suspicious, he did what kings do when under threat. He resorted to indiscriminate killing, of no small scale, slaughtering the innocents of Bethlehem. He tried to make sure that no one could forget who still held the reins of power, who sat on the throne, who had the political capital and who would, at all costs, keep dominion. “He has plundered our seas, ravaged our coasts, burnt our towns, and destroyed the lives of our people.”

This, after all, is the task of kings.

This, after all, is the way of the world.

This, after all, with deepest inevitability, is simply the struggle of humanity, of power vested in anyone at any time. Some get lucky and others belong only to the ranks of the unfortunate. Well...no.

This second part of the story, savage and dreadful, must be particularly remembered because these were the very convictions that the sages uprooted. In cryptic but resolute form, Matthew informs us that peace arises, not by catering to tyrants, but by our finding that one king who ended the usual way of kings and, quietly and mysteriously, in a most violent world, showed an entirely different way to make one’s way and return transformed.

There is nothing sentimental about this, especially when in our own time so many, who would be kings, still ask Herod’s question, consulting advisors, wondering what Jesus they should seek and what faith they should claim in order to gain the support they need and the votes necessary for the power they want. Nor can we afford to be sentimental about kings and sages when, for fear or want of power, still, the killing of innocents is routinely accepted and routinely excused. A different peace has been revealed, which cannot be co-opted in worldly scheming. It is a peace, however, that, in no less a way, demands our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor. And Epiphany begins with this tumultuous recognition.

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