

## **“Herod the Prophet”**

**Matthew 2:1-23**

We are at an “in-between” time of the year. Our liturgical calendar tells us that today is still Christmas. It is, in fact, the 12<sup>th</sup> day of the Twelve Days of Christmas. That means that tonight is the twelfth night. That should ring a bell for all of us Shakespeare fans. His play, “The Twelfth Night”, is a comedy that occurs at the traditional Twelfth Night of Christmas party. Now I know that many of us didn’t realize that there’s supposed to be a party tonight, but traditionally, it’s the last party of the old year, before we get on with tomorrow, the Epiphany, and fully settle into the New Year. So, through 12<sup>th</sup> Night, tonight, it’s still Christmas.

But, our daily calendar this morning is telling us that today is already the fifth day of the New Year. It can be difficult, emotionally, to stay wrapped up in our feelings for Christmas, while we are also being pulled fully into the New Year. Perhaps, then, we need some direction for our journey into this New Year ahead.

So, I call your attention to the prophetic words found in our Gospel lesson this morning. For in the Second chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew, we encounter the great Biblical prophet, King Herod. What he has to say to us can make all the difference in how we travel into this New Year.

Now, you may well find it a bit strange to hear of King Herod as a Biblical prophet. Prophets, as we think of them, are normally men and women of faith; people God raises up to speak to their own generation. Their messages are nearly always a plea to turn again to God; to have lives that embody kindness and mercy, and to act justly with everyone, especially the poor.

But Herod? Well, you don't have to know much about history to know this fellow we call Herod the Great, was one of the most murderous villains who ever lived! He had a paranoid personality. When anyone even faintly opposed him, he had them summarily executed; and that included his own wife and most of his children. The Roman Emperor Augustus, noting that Jewish law forbade the slaughtering of pigs for food, once said, "It is safer to be Herod's pig than Herod's son!"

What a lovely guy! In our passage this morning, when it says that Herod was troubled over the news of the birth of a king, and "all Jerusalem" was "troubled with him", note that it says they were troubled "with", not "for" him. They knew that if Herod was troubled, that was going to be trouble for them.

Yet, in spite of it all, Herod's advice concerning the birth of Jesus has come down through the ages with a prophetic ring of truth. Deeply troubled, Herod said to the Wisemen, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word that I too may come and pay him homage." Herod's motive was, of course, not homage, but homicide. And yet, his counsel regarding the Christ Child may be among the most prophetic words ever spoken. In fact, if you and I fail to heed them, we may miss the most important thing we can do in this New Year ahead.

**For Herod's first word to us is this: that this Christmas almost complete, and this New Year already begun, involve a journey we are all to make. "Go, and search diligently for the Child."** When we think about it, this time of year is full of journeys. It begins with Mary and Joseph making that long 70 mile trek from Nazareth south to Bethlehem. Having traveled it myself by bus, I can hardly imagine how Mary made it on the back of a donkey.

Then there's the journey of the shepherds who, when they heard the angelic chorus, came on the run. Later comes the journey of our Wisemen, which ends tomorrow with the coming of the Epiphany, following the star to the place where the child was living. After that comes the Holy Family's escape from political persecution as they become refugees in a foreign country, before they, at last, are able to return home again.

Even in our own time, this is always a time for journeying. I remember a few years ago being told by a parishioner of how she got a visit from a jolly bearded fellow with a great big bag over his shoulder. She said, "My son came home from college with his laundry!"

But all of our journeys at this time of year are just a reflection of the journey that is at the heart of it all. For on one definite night, God slipped into human history in the least expected form to share in person the life we live, so that we might share in person the life he lives. Think of it; God the Almighty Creator, entering a back alley stable, in a nearly forgotten corner of the world, that he might share our life, so that we in turn might share in his love and his life.

That's what it means to take this journey: to discover the child who is God. And that is the miracle of it all, that God is Emanuel: God with us, and in us. Go and search diligently for this child, says Herod the prophet.

**Here's the other part of Herod's prophecy: the miracle of this journey has to be personally experienced; it cannot be had by proxy. "When you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and worship him."** But, here's where Herod made his fatal error. He said to the Wisemen: "You go...You make the search...Then you can bring me word." But Herod had no intention of going himself. And, that won't do. No one can delegate the journey to another.

Herod is right in one respect, we are to return and tell the Good News of Jesus to everyone, that they too might journey, and discover, and finally worship. But, Herod failed. Herod had no intention of actually worshipping as he said. Herod saw no personal need of a savior, though he needed most desperately to be saved from himself. Ultimately he was left to live with the Hell of the person he had chosen to become.

He was wrong! We all must take the journey. In the end, the Christ who comes to us, calls us to make that personal journey in which we decide if we will invite him into our hearts as our Lord and Savior. The problem, the thing that stops so many from making that journey, is the same thing that stopped Herod. We cannot accept or appreciate the gift of a Savior, if we have never owned-up to our personal need for one; if we have never faced ourselves with the truth that we are the ones in need of that saving gift. A Savior is no gift at all, until we know in our hearts how deeply we need to be saved; saved from ourselves. If we would be saved from ourselves, we must reach out for the one who has come reaching out for us.

A department store in a small town, would, every Christmas, invite the children of the town to paint the store windows with Christmas scenes. One particular year, a young girl painted a picture of the First Christmas, instead of the usual Santa's and snowmen. She had all the animals there in the manger, and Mary holding the Baby, and Joseph, and was just finishing when a car came up. Out tumbled a mother and four children, and they gazed at the Santas and snowmen. But one little boy stood motionless in front of the girl's painting of the Holy Family. He was transfixed by the Christ Child in Mary's arms. Suddenly he reached up on tip toes and touched the Baby's tiny fingers. The paint was still wet.

Just then, the store's owners came out to see how all the children's work had gone. When they looked at the manger, there was a tiny

smudge on the picture's surface; on Jesus' fingers, just where the boy had reached for them. The young girl, still nearby, rushed up and started to repair it. "No, don't," said one of the owners. "That little smudge is a reminder of what this is really all about; a time when we can touch the Savior."

Herod missed the Savior because he sent someone else. What about you and me in this New Year? Don't make the same mistake. Take the journey. Heed the words of Herod the Prophet, "Go, search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, tell everyone, that they may come and worship." May you have the Merriest twelfth day, and this Twelfth Night of Christmas! And, may you have a most blessed New Year!