

Herod was a man with much to fear. He is described as an “unhappy man with two souls,” forever caught between two worlds: Rome and Judea; the Jews and the Edomites; the ruling classes and the peasants; the temple priests and the noble families. Herod was not popular with his Jewish subjects because of his tenuous claim to the throne and his non-Jewish ancestry. As the puppet king for the occupying Romans, the charge of “collaborator” stuck to Herod like the stuff that stuck to the bottom of ancient sandals. Herod rebuilt the Temple in Jerusalem to win favor with his Jewish subjects, but his plan backfired because of the high taxes Herod imposed and the slave labor Herod demanded for his building campaigns.

The historian Josephus paints a grim picture of the physical and mental degeneration of the aging king, describing Herod as deluded, violent, and vicious (*Wars*, 1:33-35). The story of Jesus’ birth falls within these last few declining years of Herod’s life and reign. When Herod sent the Wise Men to Bethlehem, he charged them with finding the child and reporting his location back to Herod. Warned in a dream of Herod’s duplicity, the Wise Men did not return. When Herod learned this, he flew into a rage and ordered the execution of all the baby boys in Bethlehem. Herod was not a very nice guy nor a very stable ruler.

Which explains the second part of the verse: not only was Herod frightened at the news of a new King of the Jews, but “*all Jerusalem with him.*” What an extraordinary phrase! As the king raged, the citizens trembled. When Herod felt threatened, he made life miserable for everyone else. If the king ain’t happy, ain’t nobody happy! Herod feared for his power, his life, and his future. He dreaded what lurked in the shadows. Herod was a man afraid of his own shadow.

Now, the thing about shadows is simply this: shadows mean that there is a light shining nearby. In this case, Jesus, the light of world, was coming into the world, and this new light frightened Herod. Herod probably knew the prophecies about the promised Messiah: how he would be of King David’s house, how he would reign over Israel, and how his kingdom last forever.

These prophecies frightened Herod because they challenged Herod’s assumptions about power. His fear stemmed from his incorrect understanding of the Messiah’s power. Herod ruled by force; Jesus would rule by grace. Herod kept power through

coercion; Jesus’ power came from love. Herod demanded loyalty; Jesus earned respect. Herod imposed a military peace; Jesus came to be our peace. Herod built palaces for pleasure and monuments for ego; Jesus came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. Herod coopted religion to serve his own ends; Jesus taught that faith leads to God and into new life. Herod had every reason to fear this new light because it challenged what he believed, how he acted, and who he was.

The irony is that it was to people like Herod –the last, the least, and the lost – that this light came into the world. “[Jesus] was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:10-13).

Herod did not need to fear Christ’s light, he only needed to let it shine into the dark recesses of his life and heart. But Herod was too much a creature of the dark to embrace this light. His first instinct was to preserve what he had, to cling to power, to feel secure against the world. What he really needed to do was let go of the world, submit to this higher power, and discover the forgiveness and eternal life God offers. Jesus comes to shine God’s healing light into the dark spaces we prefer to keep hidden, and to free us from our fears by offering us the Truth that sets us free.

The world is filled with shadows. Greed. Poverty. Racism. Hatred. Coercion. Abuses against people and the planet. Most of these are shadows of our own making, and we cannot seem to overcome them. So, our God comes to help us. Before the glory and power of Jesus, the shadows of this world flee, and we no longer need to fear them. For, as Jesus said, “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

The English rendering of this verse is too tame. The original Greek conveys the idea that Jesus overcoming the troubles of this world is not some far off, longed-for event; it has already happened! Jesus came at Christmas to change the world’s trajectory, to steer us out of the darkness and into God’s glorious light. Although the world is not

yet perfected, the outcome is assured because, as Isaiah reported, “the zeal of the Lord Almighty will do this” (9:7). God desired so desperately to disperse the shadows and to right the wrongs of this world, that God came in person, as Jesus Christ, to begin the transformation.

Now, it falls to us to partner with God’s transforming work each day, each moment, and with each person we encounter, sharing the hope we have of a world where will be light and life, and love. This is not easy work God calls us to do, the shadows contain powerful enemies, but with God on our side all things are possible (Luke 18:27). Remember, we need not fear the shadows any longer, for the light of Jesus is shining God’s love and grace and mercy and power into those dark spaces; and once God’s light reaches you, there is no possibility of staying as you once were. God is present on earth, among mortals, and God is already accomplishing God’s vision of a restored humanity and a recreated world.

Herod was frightened because he could not comprehend this new thing God was doing. His human ambitions and his limited imagination kept him a prisoner of the shadows. And all Jerusalem trembled because they did not know any other way to live. But for those who are willing to let go of the shadows there is light everlasting and life forevermore. At the beginning of a new year, may we be less like Herod so scared and stuck in our ways, and more like the wise travelers who see new stars and risk boldly for God’s Kingdom, upheld by the power of God’s Holy Spirit, in the service of Jesus Christ on behalf of the world.

Prayer: God of light, shining in darkness, through a little child, born in Bethlehem, you open to us the treasure of your grace. Help us to search diligently for him, so that we may offer our lives to you with thanksgiving, joy, and praise; through Jesus Christ, the rising star. Shepherd of Israel, you sent a star to enlighten the wise and a child to topple the tyrant. Make us wise enough to seek you among the least of your children, wise enough to trade our treasure for the gift of overwhelming joy. Amen.

Source:

- “Meaning of Idiom ‘Afraid of One’s Own Shadow.’” <https://www.idioms.online/afraid-of-your-own-shadow/> Retrieved 12/16/2021.
- Joan Comay and Ronald Brownrigg. “Who’s Who in the Bible.” *Herod the Great*. Wings Books: New York, NY. © 1971. Pages 134-136.

Herod: Afraid of His Shadow

Sunday, December 26, 2021

Matthew 2:1-12

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

There is an old joke about men hating to ask for directions. But in our text, Wise Men from the east came following a star and stopped at the palace of King Herod in Jerusalem to ask, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage” (2:2). These astrologers from a far-off country observed a new star in the night sky and knew enough of the ancient prophecies to realize that this start heralded the birth of God’s promised Messiah. They seek King Herod’s help in locating the child. It’s a seemingly simple request for directions; but I am always struck by the words that follow their request. “When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him” (2:3).

Are you familiar with the phrase, “he’s afraid of his own shadow”? Someone who is afraid of their own shadow is extremely timid, nervous, fearful, and easily frightened. If ever there was a Bible character who had reason to fear his own shadow, it was King Herod. Herod was born in 73 BC in Idumea, south of Judea, a member of the Idumean (Edomite) tribe. Herod’s father worked for the Hasmonean rulers; a Jewish dynasty descended from the Maccabees who ruled Israel as Roman client kings. The Idumeans were ethnically Arab, but their Hasmonean masters forcibly converted them to Judaism.

Through political intrigue and skillful diplomacy, Herod extended his authority from Galilee to become ruler of all the Jewish territories, first as a Governor and then as king of the Jews. Herod was a clever politician, consistently backed by his Roman overlords who appreciated his ability to keep the peace and fulfill Rome’s tax demands. Herod was a prodigious builder of cities and palaces, but an unpredictable ruler, devious when it came to his own interests and security. He could be absolutely merciless when he felt his own safety threatened: Herod executed one of his wives and two of his sons because he feared their growing power.