

“UNBEARABLY GOOD NEWS”

Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

January 7, 2024

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Let's begin with Herod. I sometimes think of him as an insecure king who slaughters innocent children based on an unwarranted fear. Magi show up at the palace looking for a child, whom the stars have told them would become the King of Judah. It's certainly not unreasonable to assume that the current king would know something about this. But he doesn't, and the news frightens him as well as "all of Jerusalem." When the wise men neglect to share his location, Herod's fear leads him to kill every child two and under in the town of Bethlehem.

W.H. Auden writes a very imaginative monologue for Herod in his Christmas Oratorio, *For the Time Being*. At one point Herod says,

O dear, Why couldn't this wretched infant be born somewhere else? Why can't people be sensible? I don't want to be horrid. Why can't they see that the notion of a finite God is absurd? Because it is. And suppose, just for the sake of argument, that it isn't, that this story is true, that this child is in some inexplicable manner both God and Man, that he grows up, lives, and dies, without committing a single sin? Would that make life any better? On the contrary it would make it far, far worse. (p.58).

Before he says this, he had been talking about the improvements that he had brought in since becoming king, that he had made life so much better for the people of Jerusalem. Auden is drawing on the notion of the "Pax Romana," a term historians have used to describe an unprecedented time of peace. His version of Herod sees himself as contributing to the peace and welfare of the city, but it was a peace made secure by the presence of the military. The welfare was not so universally shared. Those in authority often worried about uprisings. Stories about potential "messiahs" were taken seriously and often addressed ruthlessly.

The wise men seem oblivious to the political situation, unaware of the fear that news of a new born king would strike in Herod and in the many in Jerusalem that had benefitted from his rule. The Messiah embodied for the powers in place a clash with their own authority.

This clash with political and later religious authority will become a dominant theme in the rest of Matthew's gospel and will eventually lead to the cross. What we sometimes fail to acknowledge is that this clash between authorities doesn't end with Jesus' resurrection and the establishment of the new faith community.

Paul's outreach to Gentiles doesn't sit well with Jesus' earliest followers who understood themselves as a movement within Judaism. They wanted the new Gentile converts to

become circumcised and follow the rules of the Torah. Paul understood this attempt to preserve aspects of the tradition as a rejection of the freedom offered to new believers. This dynamic repeated itself as the movement became an institution and every time that the institution experienced radical changes. The rejection of slavery, the ordination of women, the welcome of people without regard to sexual orientation or gender identity were all issues debated by clashing authorities, sometimes leading to reform, other times leading to division.

Herod was afraid that he'd be on the losing side of a new messianic movement. He had given his loyalty to Rome, and so needlessly ended up slaughtering innocent children. I say, "needlessly," because Jesus never intended to replace him. In welcoming Gentiles, Paul never called on Jesus' Jewish followers to reject their tradition. Instead he called on them to not impose themselves on the newcomers. Ordaining women was not a rejection of men. Marrying same-sex couples is not an attack on the institution of marriage. But these changes have triggered fear responses in many people.

It's not just Herod or the city of Jerusalem that is afraid. We, too, are afraid sometimes of the changes that freedom in Christ may bring to our lives. In her comments on the first chapter of Galatians, Wendy Farley refers to the gospel as "the unbearably good news" (p.88). I was really struck by this phrase, by the notion that good news could be seen as unbearable. It reminded me that the gospel does shake things up, shakes us up. Good news frequently clashes with authority, even religious authority. Referring to Paul's understanding of the gospel in Galatians, Farley writes,

If this letter is bad news for authoritarianism, it can be good news for those committed to the constant renewal of Christianity. It is good news for those outside systems of power who might see more clearly ways in which Christianity has cut off some of its own limbs in the name of tradition. It is good news for all those oppressed by the church: women, slaves, the poor. It is good news for all those lovers of Christ whose wisdom about the Divine is distorted or repressed by leaders of the church. (p. 114).

The wise men are such a beloved part of our Christmas story. Following the star is such a wonderful metaphor for our own spiritual journeys. The giving of gifts inspires us to acts of generosity. Even when we notice Herod, he doesn't trouble us much because he's the enemy and we are, of course, Jesus' friends. But when we realize that we have aspects of our lives that we'd like to preserve, just like Herod... well, maybe we begin to understand why Farley adds "unbearably" to the good news. We should be aware of the warning implicit in Jesus' coming, in the good news that he preached.

But then... we should take a deep breath, set our fear aside, and really listen to the good news. Listen to the whole sentence. Farley writes, "The gospel is the unbearably good news that divine love anticipates us, surrounds us, precedes us; anything that serves as an obstacle to our awareness of this love is 'accursed.'" To be an obstacle to divine love is not what we want, but to avoid it involves sacrifice because, as Farley says, "the gospel

makes every religious, civil, and social authority secondary to confidence in the intimate love of God manifest in Christ” (p. 88).

If Jesus is a threat, it is only to misplaced loyalties, unhealthy habits, exaggerated egos, and divisive desires. The story of the wise men, of the birth of Jesus is not a story to inspire fear. It’s a story about “divine love” that “anticipates us, surrounds us [and] precedes us.” Thanks be to God. Amen.

Farley, Wendy, in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 3*. Westminster John Know Press: Louisville KY. 2010.

Auden, W.H. *For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio*. Edited by Alan Jacobs. Princeton University Press: Princeton NJ. 2013 [poem originally published 1944]