

Empowered by the Light

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to thee, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen

Where would we be without Joseph? Just as the birth of Jesus depended on Mary's bold "Yes" to the Angel Gabriel, his survival depended on Joseph, the man who loved her enough to stand by her despite whatever fear or doubt he had. But that was only the beginning.

We would not be here today – two thousand years later --had Joseph not said "Yes" again by immediately acting on the warning the angels gave to him in a dream as soon as the Wise Men had left: take your wife and baby and flee to Egypt? Flee? Now it was Mary's turn to accept the unimaginable-- that the powerful emperor was somehow threatened by her powerless infant son. But off they went. Poor. Exhausted. Despite their fear, they fled. Refugees on the run from Herod.

Herod-- an evil oppressive dictator if there ever was one--- who was so paranoid that he felt the birth of a *baby* was a threat to his empire and power.

So here we are here on Epiphany to celebrate the light of Christ coming into the world. But if we bathe too long in its gentle glow we can easily miss the reality of the drama that was unfolding. A mad king was out to destroy the baby believed to be the King of the Jews—even though he was still, well, a baby.

He told the Wise Men to find him so he could pay homage but that was a lie.

Like Joseph, the Wise Men were warned in a dream and not to return to Herod but to go “home by another way” which helped buy time for Mary, Joseph and Jesus to escape to Egypt.

It’s a wild and preposterous story. But it is our story. And at its heart, it’s about moving beyond fear and acting despite fear. Everyone could have chosen differently. But they didn’t, choosing instead to trust in the angel messengers who appeared in their dreams disrupting what they thought they knew about their lives.

Except that is for Herod. Possessed by his irrational fear of losing power, murder came naturally to him: he executed his favorite wife, his brother-in-law, and three of his sons because he thought they wanted his crown.

When he realized the Wise Men’s betrayal, Herod ordered that all children under two in and around Bethlehem be murdered.

Too often ignored in the starry glow of Epiphany is Rachel, weeping in blistering lamentation, and refusing consolation because all of her children were gone.

This is the world into which God sent his son. A world of suffering, pain and ruthless violence. We fool ourselves if we don’t see the throughline from the manger to the cross.

Writes Rev. Shannon Kerschner:

Matthew wanted to remind us that our baby Savior was born in the time of King Herod and into all that implies, so we might trust that our God has honestly entered into *all* of it, in order to embrace *all* of it, *all* of us, with holiness and love and solidarity.¹

¹ Kerschner, Shannon, Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, Illinois, Epiphany sermon, 1/4/15

And we must embrace all of it too. We can't pretend that our faith is some sacred version of an EZ pass that enables us to sail through life. It most surely is not.

In the run up to Christmas through Advent I've sat at the bedsides of the dying, embraced a tearful parishioner whose life was too much to bear, and made several hospital visits including an ICU, with parishioners waiting for news that would define their futures. And then there's the rest of the world ravaged by war and despair.

And yet, and yet, here we are. Holding onto love. Holding onto hope because a little baby has come into the world against all odds. We are not to merely bask in the light of Epiphany but be empowered by it. To find in love, Christ's wild and preposterous unconditional love, the strength to move forward through whatever is to come.

We are tethered to our traditions and held to the stories like bell buoys that light the way home after whatever pulls us away from our safe shores.

Epiphany reminds us to embrace the unexpected. To be prepared to make an about turn in our lives when God calls us to something new.

Do not blind yourself to the angels who might be beckoning you onward into the liberating, life-giving love of God. We will never live without fear but we can always choose to live *beyond* our fears. When we remain shackled to fear we opt out of possibility and new life. Reminds pastor Nadia Bolz Weber:

There are angels hovering round us, good people of God. There are messengers of love all around. And again, and forever, they say: *do not be afraid*. Do not be afraid. For in the heart of God there is enough love to cast out fear. Herods of the world, take note.²

² Bolz Weber, Nadia, "The Corners". January 6th, 2022

And may we all embrace Epiphany's light and let it into the dark corners of our lives and shine forth into our beleaguered world. Epiphany can be a time of magic and awe, especially when we open our hearts to look for God in unexpected places and choose to act and live beyond our fears.

Epiphany reminds us we are baptized into the light of Christ. We live with the promise of the resurrection, not the hope, but the *promise* of the resurrection. Fear and death are never the end in Herod's time or our own.

AMEN