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“When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him...” Matthew 2:4

Many of you have been in touch yesterday afternoon, evening, and even late last night (most of us were still up) to say how disgusted, sad, afraid or angry you were feeling about the attack on the United States Capitol building and President Trump’s incitement of it. There is room in our church community for all those feelings, reactions, and for the deep thought and prayer that will be needed in response. I know you and your faith. We will get through this.

One of you wrote me: “I don’t know if I can handle one more ‘unprecedented’ event.” It has been a year of unprecedented, unwelcome and upsetting events. The pandemic, the shutdown, the ongoing suffering, and now a frightening surge. The murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd and others and the national, multiracial and almost entirely peaceful uprising in response. And then the election, the first “debate”, the courageous turnout, and President Trump’s refusal to concede his decisive loss. We need to give ourselves space to be shocked and disoriented, but also to pull closer together to affirm our faith in ‘unprecedented’ times. Our faith is made for times like these.

It is weirdly fitting that our text for Sunday’s observance of the Epiphany is Matthew 2. In the story, astrologers from a far away land arrive in the capital of Jerusalem and approach King Herod with the “joyous” news of a great new king arising for Israel. The text says that Herod was afraid. His reign was unpopular, his hold on power tenuous, and his actions often violent. Cosmic signs of a great new king arising were not good news to him. And so “all Jerusalem was frightened with him.”

Now one could easily take the comparison too far, but yesterday’s deliberate invitation to and incitement of violence sounds eerily like Herod. A ruler desperately hanging on to power, and willing to do anything. The capital shaken by his fear and pride.

How do people of faith respond? We can remember what was happening in Bethlehem that was so threatening. The prince of peace was born; the gentle ruler of the nations; the promise of God’s coming kingdom of truth and justice. And how much this birth frightened the powerful.

Yesterday, a line was crossed. This violation had been coming for a long time, but some of us couldn’t see it. It would never get that bad, we thought. But it has. And it is time to be absolutely clear that the hate, lies, propaganda, and pandering to violent white supremacists must stop. But I hope our response will never descend into the kind of blanket dehumanizing of those with whom we disagree that contributed to this disaster in the first place. It is the violence, its perpetrators and enablers that should be our immediate focus; and they should be exposed, stopped and prosecuted. Then there is the long, continuing struggle against racism, corruption, inequality, hopelessness and bigotry that we must take up again.

We have been here before. Unfortunately, it is not unique in Christian or American history to be called by God to respond to the misuse of power and violence. We are not meant to feel comfortable right

now, but we are meant to know that we are not alone or helpless. We are grounded in a God whose power extends beyond what we think is possible. We are grounded in Christ, who understands our world and the misuse of power far better than we ever will—and who shows us the way forward: the way of peace, the way of humility, the way of caring for the marginalized, of binding up the brokenhearted, and of setting the captives free. We cannot do this on our own, but we are not meant to. For as Paul reminds us in Romans, the Spirit goes before us – even when we no longer have the words or know what to do.

Epiphany is the season of light in the darkness. Of a star rising over an occupied land. Of a helpless infant who by weakness will overcome the powerful. Of God's inevitable victory over sin and death, and all the forces that will resist it to the end. Though we are deeply troubled by events, our foundation is unshakable, and our hope is as bright and clear as the star.

Prayer:

Almighty God:

On this day when our heads are still spinning, bring us peace.

On this day when we don't know what to do, enable our aching bodies and tired eyes to rest.

On this day when we feel shocked, help us to sit in the discomfort.

On this day when we feel unsafe, wrap us in your protection.

Help us to remember that it is not our wisdom, but yours, that will guide us onward.

We look to the glory of your Son as our Epiphany star,
lighting our way forward.

Help us to reach out for help when we need it.

Empower us to reach out to others when we can muster it.

Prince of peace, bring peace in our troubled world.

Strengthen our leaders and institutions,
that they might be courageous arbiters of peace and justice.

Give us all wisdom, strength, faith and love.

Bring your balm, the balm in Gilead. Amen.