HEROD

No one wants to read this part of the Christmas story. After the heartwarming story of Jesus' birth when there were celebrations on earth and in the heavenly realm, when stars shone and angels sang, when shepherds visited and the magi brought gifts… the story takes a turn. Herod, the tyrant ruler takes over. He is enraged, terrified and green with envy. He slaughters all children, two years of age and under, in and around Bethlehem, shedding innocent blood and turning the area into carnage, turning Baby Jesus into an asylum seeker in his first few years of life on earth. Very quickly this charming birth turns into a horrifying bloodshed.

Herod is an interesting character. Known as Herod "the Great," he was given the title "King of the Jews" in 40 BCE. He became governor of Galilee at the age of 26 and after consolidating his power he ruled over Judea for 33 years. Yet, he was an Arab gentile. His mother, Cyprus, was a princess from Petra, the Nabatean kingdom, today's Jordan. His diplomat father, Antipater, was an Idumaean, from the land of Edom, also in today's Jordan. Hence, he was never accepted as the legitimate ruler of Judaea or Israel. Perhaps for that reason religiously he practiced Judaism, politically he was Roman. He always sided with Rome.

Known for his shrewd politics Herod married 10 wives, mostly for political reasons which resulted in 15 children, 10 sons. After six years of marriage to his first wife, he banished his first wife and his first son, and married Marianne, a Jewish princess of royalty, hoping to gain a place among Jewish aristocracy. As he reached his 60s, he became increasingly paranoid. Accusing many of his sons of treason he had them killed. He became increasingly unstable and irrational. 5 days before he died, he put to death still another son and arranged for other executions. Herod was insane.

Herod's is a horrifying, ruthless, cruel story, which I wish was not part of the Christmas Epiphany story. I wish Matthew had skipped this part. Why did he include this atrocity in his Gospel? Why violence in the Scripture, for that matter? Because we need to be confronted with the violence we do to one another, with the horror that we are capable of imposing on one another. Otherwise we might forget, or might normalize violence, or become numb to it.

We sometimes think of the Bible as a mostly prescriptive book – dictating to us what we should do. Yet, the Bible generally is descriptive – describing to us our own selves and world. The Bible is a mirror that reflects ourselves back to us. We see ourselves in its story. Hence the violence in it is not prescriptive but descriptive of life and the world as they are.

Today, we see many brutal Herods in the world – dictators who control through force and oppressive power, through greed and self-interest alone. Herods who are masters of destruction who kill not only the body but also the spirit, the dream, the vision, the aspiration, and the hope of ordinary people. They want to extinguish the Light.

We are an Epiphany people, a people of Light. We know that in the midst of horror and devastation, in the midst of death and despair, we humans keep dreaming and visioning, keeping the Light burning. Such is the story of one man we remembered couple of days ago, Martin Luther King Jr. who had a dream and a vision. The Herods of his time stood in his way and eventually killed him. But they did not succeed in killing his dream. King died but his dream lives on. A dream where love and justice, peace and joy, equality and equity, compassion and grace, freedom and liberty for all are the values with which we live. Is such a world possible? I too dream of it.

Sometimes it can feel very gloomy. But today, I am here to remind us that no matter how strong the Herods, how deep the anguish, and how vast the despair, the Light shines in darkness and darkness has not overcome it. Keep those dreams and visions alive, keep imagining a new world, and keep being the light, for that is the only way to disarm and overcome the Herods of our world.

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