

Discerning Light: The Shadow of Christmas

Matthew 2: 1-12, 16-18

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi from the east came to Jerusalem, ² asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star in the east and have come to pay him homage.” ³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him, ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶ ‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah,
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.’ ”

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the magi and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸ Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” ⁹ When they had heard the king, they set out, and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen in the east, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹ On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi,^[1] he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the magi.

A mother once taught her children a helpful way of discerning whenever something felt “off.” She called it honoring the “ut-oh” feeling. Whenever something felt manipulative or dark, or as the gut starts telling us something isn’t right, she taught the kids to honor the “ut-oh” feeling by going to someone safe and talking about it. So at the movie theatre whenever a villain would show up on the screen her kids would blurt out, “Ut-oh.” It would have been a wise thing for the magi to have used as well. Epiphany begins with a star of wonder, its radiance marking the spot of a new beginning. But it also guides them straight into the lair of the tyrant, King Herod. Ut oh...

It may not be the Epiphany story we want to hear, but there is a shadow side to Christmas. Suddenly, the story is not G-rated anymore. The wise people just had to stop and ask for directions!—probably why tradition has them being men! And as a result they foolishly out Jesus’ birth. Ut-oh! Herod becomes frightened. As does “all of Bethlehem” our bibles say. Why? Because a frightened Herod is a dangerous Herod. And when a frightened Herod becomes unhinged there’s no telling what he will do. Now, why does that sound so familiar? So Herod

becomes afraid that something more real than him is coming, so then he has his own epiphany: “Go find the child,” he says to the magi, “and report back so I can worship him too.”

Did you hear it? The big lie.

It is a rather ironic story: the star guides the wise people into Herod’s lair, they spill the beans on the Messiah’s birth, they find Jesus and are overjoyed as they worship him. But then they have an inspired dream telling them not to go back. And the cost of their not going back causes Herod’s paranoid rage to inflict genocide on all those innocent children. Ut-oh... The Christmas story is not safe anymore. And it doesn’t take long before the shadow of terror hijacks the good news of Jesus’ birth.

Well, it resonates. While we should probably hesitate to role cast our least favorite leaders as King Herod, we have to admit the parallels are difficult to ignore. So it was then. So it is now. We see leaders who are terrified by the prospect of losing their power seats and, with their fragile egos, are willing to do anything to hang onto it. We too see all kinds of people, religious and otherwise, kissing the ring and defenders of the big lie. We too have many innocent ones under genocidal threat by way of violence or starvation because their existence is perceived as a threat to insecure leaders. It happened when Pharaoh made a declaration to toss all newborn boys into the Nile River. It happened when Herod declared war on any boy, aged two and younger. It happens in the Gaza strip as they bomb, bury, and starve the future Palestinian generation. It happens when we take away programs that help newborns and their mothers. It happens when we allow a school to prison pipeline in our schools. It happens when our own government writes legislation against the existence of our trans kids in classrooms. The parallels of legislated violence against the innocent are hard to miss. So it was then. So it is now.

But friends, here’s the thing. If the megalomaniacs and authoritarian oligarchs who rule the world in the name of violence are still here. If the shadow of terror still looms, it also means God’s light is still there as well! Still persistently shining and guiding and calling out to us in the name of peace and justice.

Heard a story on NPR yesterday as they reflected on inspirational stories over the last five years. It was about a group of inmates in Michigan who wanted to do something after George Floyd’s murder in June of 2020. As the country responded, they couldn’t congregate to protest. Nor could they march with protest signs in the courtyard. So instead, they decided to cook a special meal in Mr. Floyd’s memory. They bought their own ingredients. They got two of their best cooks to put together a menu. The normal prison food wasn’t good enough to honor George because they said, “He is us and we are him.” They had to cap the meal at 50 people, so they invited those who had the least to come join them. They also couldn’t eat together so they took their food back to their cells and ate in solidarity with each other in honor of George Floyd’s memory. When asked why they organized the meal, one of the organizers said, “something was calling me to do something.” It makes me curious: if in the moment we can see the Star of Wonder hovering over the prison.

Perhaps we sense the star hangs above Trinity as well, calling those who are labelled as outsiders because of who they are or who they love.

- Shining as a refuge for the vulnerable. Still offering sanctuary for those who don't have a home or a community.
- Still speaking against what is wrong and standing up for what is right and true.
- Calling to everyone who knows deep in their bones that the God of peace and justice is still active in the world, and love always wins eventually.

If the shadow is still here, it means so is God's light and so are God's Epiphany people.

So here we are in 2025. And as the shadows loom, don't lose sight of the Star of Wonder. In a year where more declarations against the innocent will be written. In a year where all the land will be frightened as fragile egos become unhinged. In a year full of ut-oh moments, don't forget we are God's Epiphany people who come together for a sacred meal in honor of Christ. He is us and together we are him. And as we take the meal, we take his Spirit with us into our corner of the world where we keep offering our gifts of compassion and hope to serve the light's purposes. And when we get overwhelmed by the terror, just look to the light still hovering over the shadows. Always guiding us back to the wonder of what is right and beautiful and true. Amen.