

## MATTHEW 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage."

When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him. And calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for it has been written by the prophet: *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.*

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 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."

When they had heard the king they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 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. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

## **ANOTHER ROAD**

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There is an old adage that goes, “Man makes his plans and God laughs.” And don’t we all know the truth of that. What plans of yours have been “returned to sender” in the last 10 months? “Plan A” has often turned into “Plan C, D or F” and perhaps even put into the cedar chest for another time and place. Yes, indeed, the pandemic has been a very humbling experience. The truth of the adage is indisputable.

It does make me wonder though whether there is a greater truth beneath it. Perhaps God’s laughter is not a smirk as the adage seems to imply, but of a more gentle, “What’re you gonna do?” sort of nature. Because while I do not believe God is this magnificent playwright scripting our lives to fulfill his dream for us, I do believe that God is both willing and able to guide us if we but listen to our inner voice through which God speaks to us. Because when life deals us a hand we weren’t planning on, can we not ask God for directions which will take us on Another Road to our destination? Because finding Another Road may be critical to our survival or to the survival of someone else.

The story of Epiphany highlights the wisdom in this spiritual truth. It is a beautiful story celebrated in our Creche displays featuring the three bearded regal figures who traveled on camels from the East following a star to bow before the baby Jesus surrounded by his parents and barn animals to offer him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. While no one can obviously attest to the historical veracity of the story, it nevertheless offers us some important considerations which are based upon verifiable historical facts surrounding the antagonist of the narrative, Herod, the Roman appointed client King of Judea.

To appreciate the story, you must understand who Herod was and how he was regarded by early Christians. In a word, he was despised. He was a Jew, as were most of Jesus’ followers, but he was a Roman proxy—and we know how the Jews felt about the Romans—how

anyone feels about a dictatorial regime which imposes oppressive sanctions upon them. But Rome didn't do this directly; they relied upon a Jewish puppet to do their dirty work for them—and Herod was their man. He had earned the position by suppressing a Jewish rebellion way back in 37 B.C.; and by currying the favor of Marc Antony, his friend, collaborator and patron.

By the time Jesus was born, Herod had been in power for nearly 30 years and had actually accomplished some amazing feats—most notable among them was rebuilding the Temple which had been destroyed by the Babylonians over 500 years beforehand. It was now a massive structure with an interior equalling about five football fields and surrounded by an outer court encompassing 35 acres. It was impressive! And he also spearheaded the building of many fortresses, aqueducts, theaters and public buildings. He was truly a master architect and project engineer.

His reign ended in 4 A.D. so he does fit the time frame of the narrative. He also fits the narrative in terms of his paranoia and his brutality. Indeed, name one dictator in the annals of history who maintains power for 37 years and does not ultimately rely upon violence to stay in office. Because one thing is unavoidably true—you will acquire many enemies who will plot your demise. All you have to do is look at Vladimir Putin. He cannot truly trust anyone. The only way to stay in power is to crush the opposition and if murder is what's required, then murder it will be. Because there will never be a peaceful transfer of power. It is assassinate or be assassinated.

And Herod eventually regressed into that posture. As he grew older, he became mentally unstable giving rise to a dark and cruel aspect of his personality. He was prone to violent attacks of jealousy and even had his second wife executed over rumors of her infidelity. In addition, he began to confiscate the property of anyone he believed was not loyal to him becoming extraordinary wealthy in the process.

So the fact that he is scared to death over a report of the birth of the Messiah is entirely

consistent with historical data. A messiah would be a clear threat to his power. And could he have ordered the murder of all Jewish boys born around the time of Jesus' birth? There is no historical record of any such event—and surely it would have been noted—but nevertheless could have been credible given how Herod had been behaving.

It is unclear whether the Magi themselves would also have been vulnerable to Herod's murderous scheming. But being highly evolved spiritual men, they gave heed to God's communication through a dream that they return home by Another Road.

So the Epiphany narrative provides us with a fitting conclusion to our Christmas series on "Those Who Dream." Even though the pandemic has dealt serious blows to our personal lives—and, yes, inevitably to our church—I hope that we haven't stopped dreaming. And we know that the reality of life is that it is never going to be easy—and isn't designed to be easy. The myth of the Garden in Genesis makes that perfectly clear. We may dream of living in paradise, but this isn't it! Rather, the truth about life is its impermanence—here today and gone tomorrow which means that the road we walk upon presents us with one detour after another just to continue our journey. And if we simply keep walking right through the detour signs, we will pay the price. Finding Another Road is crucial to survival. Isn't that the theory of evolution—the survival of the fittest? And who are the fittest? Those who adapt to the changes. Those who seek and find Another Road.

I don't wish to be an alarmist, but as we begin a new year, the warning signs are appearing for Trinity's continuity. Our financial situation could well become unsustainable by the end of the year. Pledges are considerably below what we need to pay our bills and while this is completely understandable given the uncertainty many members face in their personal circumstances; I do not want you to go into denial and be caught unaware. I don't want to reach a crisis point and have anyone say, "Why didn't you tell us?" I am telling you. Herod has plans for us we do not wish for him to implement. But in order to evade his grasp, it is time to begin seeking Another Road.

God will help us. We have a mission to do in this community. I do believe that is God's dream for us. So now it is our dream for ourselves that becomes the driving force sustaining ourselves. When we all work together, I have faith that we can and we will discover Another Road.

Reverend Thomas Dunlap

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