

## Matthew 2:1-12

A Baptist in the pulpit at the Congregational church?

“We’re not that kind of Baptist!” and yet we are faithful Baptists.

In addition to the Baptist tenets of Religious Freedom, Separation of Church and State and the autonomy of the local church, we believe in and practice Soul Freedom.

As is the case with many biblical texts, the details of this story have been obscured by time and tradition. For example, nowhere in our text are “3 kings” mentioned. Rather the “wise men” represent a translation of a Greek term which actually refers to astrologers or perhaps magicians, and other than the fact that these distant visitors come bearing 3 gifts, there is no indication that there were 3 wise men. Nonetheless, these wise men certainly have something to teach us regarding the value of this child.

And although our modern manger scenes are populated by the wise men, the shepherds, the angels, the animals, Mary, Joseph and of course the little baby Jesus, when was the last time you saw a manger scene with the figure of Herod ominously lurking in the background?

Despite the assertion by Caesar Augustus that it would be better to be Herod’s pig than his son, I’d like to suggest this morning that it is crucial that we keep Herod in the Christmas story. He *is* a central character.

And by writing him out of the popularized version of the account of the life of the young Jesus, we have truly obviated a vital aspect of the story.

The gospel writer informs us that at the appearance of the star, which was most likely a comet or perhaps a super nova, Herod was filled with fear, **as was the entire city**.

Herod did, in fact, die only a couple of years after these events – so perhaps his fears were founded.

Within the whole of the biblical narrative, nothing good comes when the major players are afraid.

As a result of *his* consuming fear, Herod orders the mass murder of every child in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under.

Its no wonder that Herod has been all but erased from the Christmas story. Who want to equate such horrors with the sentimentality of the birth of Jesus?

Who would dare disrupt our meditation on the pristine porcelain baby Jesus harmlessly lying in a manger?

Perhaps Herod is crafty than we assume.

“Scoff not at Herod until you acknowledge the Herod within yourself.” - so cautions New Testament scholar Douglas Hare.

Although his method was horrific and abhorrent, Herod’s goal of removing Jesus from the human story is understandable.

Herod, in his barbarism, knew the threat that Jesus could be. For as his mother Mary realized and had sang in her Magnificat found in Luke's gospel, Jesus would upset the social order, undo the ease of the privileged while defending the rights of the poor.

In a word, this kid spelled nothing but trouble for the status quo of the elites and in his deluded mind, King Herod was merely protecting his own interests by seeking to eliminate Jesus from the scene.

Yes the wise men saw greatness in Jesus from the beginning, but not the greatness of Herod, for Jesus would be the king of Peace and the values in his kingdom – the kingdom of God – are not those of the monetary nor of the military - but of love.

Steadfast love which does not recoil in the face of the empire and the oppressor, nor does it resort to violence to achieve its end.

So here's the question I hope we will wrestle with as we begin the season of Epiphany and move toward Lent and Easter:

Have we like Herod, sought to eliminate the threatening aspects of Jesus...

His call to nonviolence as he encourages us to love our enemies

His call on us to be peacemakers and lovers of God and humanity, beginning with ourselves

His disconcerting expectation that we will, not merely worship him, but actually follow him

And by following him respond to the call by actively engaging in the work of Jesus - healing the sick, clothing the naked, welcoming the stranger, the foreigner, the so called 'illegal alien', loving the political prisoner, the war criminal, the fear mongers, the homophobes, our neighbors near and far, our family members who disagree with us, despise us, condemn us...

to realize the value in God's eyes of every human being and then to actively work for our collective equality, our dignity, our individual and universal human rights. Certainly...these are difficult demands and they come not from a pristine baby super-glued to a manger and purchased at your local discount store...no...they come from a man who has suffered...greatly...for loving the unloved and the unwanted.

So let's hear Herod out this time around.

Let's give his case, certainly not his means, but his fears, his concerns full consideration.

Do we really wish to follow this Jesus, to value what he values and love what he loves?

In our Christianity have we been sidetracked on a sentimental jaunt or we engaging in a substantive journey?

As a good Baptist I must encourage you to decide these matters, not vicariously, but by exercising your own soul freedom – these questions you must answer for yourself.