

Two Men and a Child

**A sermon given by Rev. Dr. Gregory Young
Presented on Sunday, December 26, 2010**

Prayer:

Gracious God, as we gather in your holy presence remembering the birth of your son our savior, we pray that you will open our hearts and minds to once again receive the precious gift of your love; that we might be equipped to live as people of your justice and your grace that your peace would come to reign not only in our hearts, but in the hearts of all people. In Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Sermon:

I don't know about you, but one of the things I enjoy doing while I'm driving is checking out the bumper stickers that people have on their cars when I'm stopped for a traffic light or a stop sign if there is a car in front of me, I typically will find myself edging up a little bit with the car just so that my eyes can focus and read the message. And there's all kind of messages out there. They can be entertaining like the one I saw that says "My Other Car is a Rolls Royce" and they were driving around a beat up old Chevy. There are those bumper stickers that make a social statement like "Free Tibet" or those who like to show their political affiliations like "Obama/Biden." Sometimes I find an insightful bumper sticker; one that causes me just to pause and reflect about my own life such as "Give Peace a Chance." And then there was the one that one day I read while I was driving along that I found very disturbing. It said very simply "My Child Beat-up Your Honor Roll Student."

This one was particularly upsetting to me. Not because either of my sons were on the honor roll but I could image how a family with an honor roll student must feel reading such a message. It's a scary statement. And if

I were on the honor roll and read such a message I might even find myself afraid to go to school. As a parent I might even contact the school officials to ask what measures were being taken by the school district to protect students from bullies. Beyond being a frightening statement I think we have all found recently that a bumper sticker like that is a prophetic statement because sometimes honor roll students and other students for other reasons are ridiculed and abused by other students.

In our Gospel reading today, one man, Herod, had a frightening reaction to the birth of Jesus. One that should give us great difficulty this day in hearing it read. It is one that has always bothered me this first Sunday immediately following our Christmas celebrations. When Herod had learned from the wise men and his advisors that the king of the Jews had been born in Bethlehem, Herod was threatened. A new leader for the Jews who were living now under Roman rule could potentially threaten his own power base over the Jews. There were many Jews who openly expressed their anger with Roman rule and they might actually come to follow this new king when he matured and came into power. This new king of the Jews might actually disturb Roman rule and upset what had become known as the Peace of Rome. To clearly establish his power base in Jerusalem and the area assigned to his command, and to improve his image with the emperor, Herod felt he had to act swiftly to squash the reign of this new born king of the Jews.

And so he asked the wise men when they ascertained where this new born king was, to come back and tell him that he might go and worship this new king of the Jews. When Herod realized that the wise men from the East were not returning, Herod put another plan into action. He called his leaders together and asked them to take some men to Bethlehem and he ordered them to kill of all the male children of the Jews under 2 years of age. If he couldn't learn the exact location of the new born king so that he could put him to death, then Herod felt all the young males of the Jews

living in Bethlehem must be put to death. What a horrible reaction to the birth of our savior. Herod would eliminate this potential threat to his power base and his rule and ultimately to the rule of the Emperor and of Rome. Herod hoped to further his political aspirations by acting decisively to maintain Roman rule over the Jews and to maintain the Peace of Rome in that part of the world.

That's the way it is with bullies; they rule by apparent might and fear. They count on good people submitting to their evil designs. Their hope is that by exercising their power over others they will rise to greater fame and power while trampling on the necks of those who refuse to join in the fight. It is the reading from the prophet Isaiah today that offers some potential help and comfort to us through this terrible Gospel reading. Isaiah states, "[God] became their savior in all their distress. It was no messenger or angel but [God's] presence that saved them." As the parents of Bethlehem wept over the lifeless bodies of their sons, so too did God weep. While Joseph and Mary and Jesus may have left Bethlehem to find safety in Egypt, God did not leave Bethlehem. As Rachel was heard weeping and refused to be comforted, so God was weeping with a heart longing to bring comfort.

Another man in our Gospel reading today, Joseph, had a very different reaction and response to the birth of Jesus, and thank God he did. We remember from our reading last Sunday that Joseph was ready to put Mary away when he learned that she was pregnant. But an angel offered another solution to the problem and Joseph became her husband and ultimately Jesus' daddy. Joseph embraced the life that God had given to Mary and to him. He cradled and cared for baby Jesus. He provided and protected Mary's son as if Jesus were his own child. He remained faithful to God and obedient to his God-given mission to take care of Jesus and Mary.

Luke had recorded the long journey of Mary and Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem and now the writer of Matthew tells us of a second long

journey from Bethlehem to Egypt. Certainly Joseph would have been concerned about water, food, and shelter for Mary and Jesus during that trip through the desert to Egypt. He would have been on the look-out for robbers and others who might bring harm to his family. As they journeyed toward Egypt Joseph would have probably been heard asking himself "Where will we stay and who will offer us a place to live? At least in Bethlehem there was family and there were Jews. We could find safety there. Will we find Jews in Egypt or will we have to find our own way?" It was for Joseph a risky trip, full of danger and uncertainty; it was a journey of faith commissioned by God. Joseph ventured forth from Bethlehem heading toward Egypt trusting in the one who had brought his people and brought him and Mary to this point in their lives. Joseph reacted to Jesus' birth with trust and obedience to God; a very different reaction than the bully Herod.

The bad news concerning the Herods of this world is that they often times do have power over us and control us: an abusive spouse; an unjust employer; a terrorist who seeks to control us with threats of violence and death; taunting that crushes a young person's ego to the point of seeing suicide as the only escape; bullying that leads to acts of desperation on the part of those who have been bullied too long and feel they must act. When we find ourselves under the control of such persons, it is frightening, degrading, painful, and leaves us feeling hopeless as though no one cares. It is important for us even as we remember the words of Isaiah it is important for us to remember that at such times when one suffers God suffers as well and is present bringing hope, peace and love to the one who is suffering. God longed to comfort the mothers of Bethlehem in their grief and longs to comfort us as well in our suffering.

The good news that our Gospel reading brings to us concerning the Herods of this world is that their days are numbered. Just as Herod died and Joseph and Mary and Jesus were able to make the trip back home from Egypt

finally coming to rest and reside in Nazareth, so the Herods of our lives will come to an end. Our reading reminds us that Jesus lives to fight another day and the weapon that he will use in battle will not be the weapons of a bully, but will be the love of God. And we thank and praise God for the hope that he brings to all.

In the saving grace of his son, our savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.