

FROM FEAR TO FAITH

The Light Leads Us Series (Part 4) | Matthew 2:1-13

I

There was delight in the Jones' home when little Henry was given the part of the angel Gabriel in the church Christmas Pageant. His mother worked for two weeks with her son on the one line he was required to say. At long last, the day of the Pageant came. As the boy nervously drifted onto the stage, Henry's mom worried that he might just stand there, saying nothing. She anxiously whispered to herself the line they'd practiced so hard -- *"It is I; be not afraid!"* And then, right on cue, the boy's voice rang out: ***"It's me and I'm scared!"***

I love that story! Part of what makes it *so* marvelous is that it is truer to the original story of Christmas than some of us know. It helps us remember that there is not only a scary side to Christmas Pageants, but to Christmas itself. I know we often reduce the yuletide season to visions of sugarplums and Santa's arrival; but the truth is that the very first Christmas appeared to some people less like a dream than a nightmare.

We usually gloss right over it on our way to the good part about the gold, frankincense, and myrrh. But it's right there in the Scriptures. The New Revised Standard version reads: **"When King Herod heard [the wise men's report about the birth of Jesus], he was frightened" (Matt 2:3, NRSV).** Now, what could possibly be so terrifying about a baby being born in Bethlehem? Why would a man like Herod be filled with fear in the face of Christmas? And, much more personally, why might you and I?

II

To get at a partial answer to that question, it may be helpful to refresh your memory about this man, Herod. In a day every bit as politically tumultuous as ours, Herod managed to hold on to the throne of Judea for nearly 40 years. Through a skillful combination of public works projects, strategic assassinations, and ruthless military suppression, Herod kept the revolutionary tendencies of the Jewish people in check. This attribute -- along with his politically savvy habit of naming his building projects after whomever was in power in Rome, or about to ascend to it -- made Herod a favorite to a succession of Roman Emperors. In recognition of his service, the Roman Senate actually awarded Herod the official title: ***"King of the Jews."***

You can imagine, then, how *"happily"* Herod must have received the words of the wise men, who asked: **"Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?" (Mat 2:2)** If the wise men were right, then the birth of this baby in Bethlehem utterly threatened Herod's power and position. It meant that there was coming a day when he would no longer be calling all the shots; when the resources of the kingdom would no

longer be his to spend mainly on himself; when he would no longer have it in his power to say who would live or die; when he would have to give up the place on the throne he had occupied for nearly 40 years! No wonder Herod was afraid.

Are you? On some level, I am, at least when I really think about the implications of Christmas. The birth of Jesus means that Someone has arrived Who belongs on the throne I currently sit in. I'm OK if Jesus is good with simply advising the current administration. I'm open to some suggestions. It's nice to have someone I can call in a pinch when I need more help. I can spare an hour or two for a spiritual consultant. But that's not what Christmas means at all.

Christmas means that the rightful King has come and he wants to govern from my Big Chair. He wants to direct the use of my resources... He wants to guide the way I treat and talk to people... He regards every thought and sphere of my life as either a loyal or yet-to-be-recovered part of his dominion. Does that register with you too? Do you see that Christmas means that our POWER and POSITION -- as most of us tend to conceive of them -- are threatened?

Herod did; and MORE as well. He understood that the birth of this baby in Bethlehem means that our pursuit of PRESTIGE is also challenged. The wise men made that clear to him. I mean, just picture the scene. These visitors from the East come shuffling into the throne room of Herod the Great. By the way, historians tell us that was the title he preferred -- "Herod the Great." These guys come traipsing in, but instead of showering him with "*O your majesty,*" and "*O your royal impressiveness,*" as other visitors must have, these men can't seem to do anything but talk about Jesus: "**We observed his star at its rising,**" they tell Herod, "**and have come to pay him homage**" (**Mat 2:2, NRSV**)

That's the second frightening thing about Christmas, as far as I can see. It means that something has happened in history that must necessarily shift the focus of our lives off of seeking to receive "homage" from others and onto paying homage to Jesus. I don't know about you, but I'll confess that making this shift is challenging for me. Truthfully, I can be a lot like the kid who asked her dad to play darts with her one day. "*Daddy,*" she said, "*I'll stand here and throw the darts. And you stand over there and say, 'Wonderful.'*"

Can any of you relate? I've lived too much to hear affirmations and accolades spoken by others towards me, and not enough to give praises to the One whose name and nature truly are "Wonderful." I know that if I'm going to get with the true spirit of Christmas, then I've got to become much more concerned about seeing Jesus' star rise, than about having others acknowledge the star on my door. I've got to be less focused on making an excellent impression on others for the sake of my good name than for the sake of His name. I have to be more open to criticism that makes me a better servant. That's going to require that I die-to-self more than I have. And that scares me.

And there's another thing about Christmas that does. I bet it scared Herod too. The coming of Jesus Christ into the world at Christmas threatens our power and position. It challenges our pursuit of prestige. But what may be hardest to take is that our perceptions about the presence (or absence) of God are shattered. Back in the first century A.D., the Jewish people – especially the more educated ones -- figured they understood God's M.O. pretty well. They believed He was mostly active in ancient times. They felt His primary interest was in whether people went to religious gatherings and observed rituals. They thought He was very high and mighty -- which is to say, extremely distant and not particularly related to daily life. A lot of people still view God this way. That is why what happened in that manger in Bethlehem could maybe create some fear for those who understood it.

Because now -- as Frederick Buechner puts it: *"Those who believe in God can never, in a way, be sure of Him again. Once they have seen Him in a stable, they can never be sure where He will appear, or to what lengths He will go, to what ludicrous depths of self-humiliation He will descend in His wild pursuit of man. [For] if holiness and the power and majesty of God were present in... this birth of a peasant child, then there is no place or time so lowly or earthbound but that holiness can be present there too. And this means that... there is no place we can hide from God, no place where we are safe from His power to break in two and recreate the human heart."*

III

Christmas can tap into some of our deepest fears. Our power and position are threatened, our pursuit of prestige is challenged, our perceptions about the presence (or absence) of God is shattered. It's understandable why a person who got that would be tempted to keep Christmas contained – like the box we keep the ornaments in. Let's just regard Christmas as something to be taken out, viewed briefly, then kept in a closet for most of the year. In a sense, that's what Herod was trying to do when he ordered the genocide he did. He was trying to contain the danger of Christmas.

But, you know, the Bible teaches that fear is not always bad. The writer of Proverbs says: **The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding (Prov 9:10)** That phrase -- fear of the Lord – carries two senses. One is a sense of *appropriate terror* before a God who so belongs in our place on the throne; who is so worthy of the utter homage -- or tribute -- of our lives; who so mysteriously does show up how and where we least expect Him. But there is another connotation to that phrase "the fear of the Lord," as biblical people understand it. It is a sense of *wondrous awe* at the benefits of having a GOD like that.

First of all, since Jesus is really the King, the good news is that we don't have to carry the weight of the throne. I think of a statue that stands outside the RCA building at Rockefeller Center in New York. Maybe you've seen it. It's of Atlas holding up the

world. The tautness of every sinew, the bend of his legs, the hunch of his back trying to hold up this world reminds me of the way I feel an awful lot of the time. It's tough to be King, to have the weight of the whole kingdom on your shoulders. But across the street, in St. Patrick's Cathedral, there is another statue. It's of a child. He has a look of delight on his face, a stance of ease and grace, and upon his outstretched hand -- balanced confidently, as if it were the most natural and joyful thing possible -- is the globe of the world. Though he is but a child, this globe is smaller than him. For the child is Jesus, and he can handle the weight. Give him the throne, will you. You'll be delighted with how He handles the job of making your life all that it can be.

Secondly, since Jesus is really the one person worthy of homage, the good news is that we can relinquish the exhausting struggle to win prestige in the eyes of others. Wise men always know that the homage belongs to Him anyway. And yet the awesome truth is that Jesus' very coming into this world is God's way of saying to you, like that father to that little girl: "You are wonderful." In the eyes of the only Person whose opinion really counts in the end, you have already been esteemed -- deemed worthy of laying down gifts for -- even the gift of God's very life upon the Cross. So forget about your star, will you? Put your efforts into pointing others towards Christ's glory, that others might receive the priceless gift of esteem, found only in Him.

And finally, let's think about this. The birth of Jesus shows us that God is more present and more unpredictable than we many think. The good news is that there is no dark stable in our life that the Light of the World can't enter. He can meet you in your financial crisis. He can be born in you in a moment of arrogant success. He can enter into and change that relationship that seems to be dying or has gone dead. He can come alongside you in your illness. He can redeem and give purpose to these next years of your life. He can renew your strength if you are weary. He can give us the courage to persevere till the COVID winter gives way to the warmth of a new day. ***The light Christ brings can lead us from fear to faith.***

Only one thing is required. One thing that Walter knew... Nine-year-old Walter also had a part in the Christmas Pageant that year. Walter was one of those awkward kids not too popular with other children. When Walt's part came up, his mom also nervously prayed that he'd remember his one line. At long last, the time came. Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus knocked on the door of the motel in Bethlehem, the door opened, and there stood Walter, the Innkeeper. His mom held her breath, but she had nothing to worry about. Walt's voice rang out: "***There's no room at the Inn!***" And right on cue, Mary and Joseph hung their heads, turned around, and walked away.

But what wasn't in the script, except in God's, was what happened next. A look of fearful concern suddenly spread across the brow of young Walt. The kind of look that was something between terror at what he was about to do, and awe that he had the chance to do it. Suddenly, Walter cried out: "***Wait! Come back! You can have my room!!***"

And the angels sang. And grace broke in. And Christmas came to that pageant – the real Christmas -- all over again. As it can happen in you and me, if we'll too say: "Come in, Lord. You can have my room! My throne. In spite of my fears -- or maybe because of them -- there's room in my heart for... I choose to put my faith in... YOU.

As we continue toward Christmas, let God hear those words from you.

Please pray with me...

Dear God, help us to live more wisely and creatively than Herod. Stop us from trying to box up or banish the fearsome implications of your arrival in OUR kingdom. Instead, turn our terror into a joy-filled awe at what it can mean for us when we give you the throne, when we focus our lives on rendering homage to You, when we look for Your presence in the dark places of our life. You who are the light of this world, shine upon us, as we put our faith afresh in you, in the name of Jesus. And all God's people said, Amen.