



# “The Conundrum of Kings”

Text: Matthew 2:1-11

*a sermon by the Rev. Kevin Scott Fleming*

**The Celebration of Epiphany  
Sunday, January 10, 2021**

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

Though we are celebrating the Feast of the Epiphany today, the day itself - the 12<sup>th</sup> day of Christmas - was this past Wednesday. It was also on this past Wednesday that we witnessed acts of insurrection, sedition, and domestic terrorism. On the day when the light of the world is celebrated by people of faith, the darkness of sin and violence was also on full display.

The story begins with an unbalanced, paranoid ruler. This is the Biblical story “in the time of King Herod.” Herod was a tyrant. He built enormous structures, including the second Temple and the port of Caesarea Maritima, and the fortresses of Masada and the Herodium, not so much for the benefit of others as to satiate his own ego need.

So it is not hard to imagine Herod being given news that some erudite philosophers were at the door. His chest must have puffed up with pride. He must have stood a little taller. He must have had that look in his eye that communicated confidence and power.

The travelers enter “the presence” and they ask one question. “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.” That word *homage* is the translation of a Greek word which means “to lie prostrate before.” There is no mention of the visitors lying face down on the floor to Herod.

Were they speaking of Herod’s children? He had children, but none were newly born. Was there a threat to his throne, or the ascension of his children to the throne? He was becoming more nervous, more paranoid. Anxiety was rising.

He calls in the members of his own administration that could be of service. There is talk of the new king. "Where is this king to be born?" A plan is forming in Herod's brain. His counselors consult the scriptures and their charts. "In Bethlehem of Judea."

Herod calls for his learned visitors. "When did the star appear?" he asks. He learned what they had observed. He attempts endearing himself to the visitors. "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." The idea of Herod lying face down before an infant (or anyone else) is laughable. He wasn't going to pay homage to anyone but himself. No, something far more nefarious was afoot.

The wise men leave and make their way to Bethlehem, find the child, and offer their homage and their gifts. And when their time in Jesus' presence was completed they left for their home country by a way that avoided further contact with Herod.

What happened after that? According to the biblical record, King Herod realized the wise men were not coming back to report to him and he ordered his soldiers to Bethlehem to kill all the children under two years old. But, Jesus was not there, for Joseph had been warned in a dream to take the child and his mother and flee to Egypt, which they did and where they stayed until Herod had died.

The sad news is, of course, that Herod is alive and well in our world today. Herod and his political descendants are still up to the old ways of violence, destruction, and murder. They deal in half-truths and outright lies to insure their power and position. They promise to be with their followers in flexing their muscles and abandon them minutes later. They surround themselves with toadies who will proclaim their greatness and kowtow to the most insane of commands.

Herod's kindred divide nations, families, and friends, while claiming to be authentically ordained of God. With Herod it is complete devotion or excommunication (or worse). There can be no questioning of positions or actions. With Herod's progeny there is no room for any other devotion or loyalty. Divide and conquer is Herod's *modus operandi*.

Herod's stock loves to combine political power and religious conviction. They recruit false prophets to proclaim their divine calling and these false prophets turn Herod's offspring into deities to be worshiped and praised. Idolatry is central to the success of Herod's descendants.

And the news, sadder still, is that there is no shortage of followers for the Herods of today. They will travel great distance, spare no expense, to gather together to “cry havoc! and let slip the dogs of war.” They will destroy buildings, traditions, families, and society itself to offer their homage to their king.

They do not care if they cause pain but they are upset when they feel pain in the pursuit of pleasing Herod. They are beyond the law, because they believe - truly or falsely - that Herod will care and bring them justice. Herod never really cares as much as he says he does about anyone other than Herod.

The challenge of being a leader is that it comes with a conundrum. Whenever power is received, it holds two possibilities. Power can be used for good, or it can be used for bad. This is the conundrum of kings. It was the mystery - the puzzle - the predicament that faced Herod two millennia ago and has been faced by all of his political descendants ever since.

But, it is also the precise choice that each one of us faces every day - and sometimes several times every day. Will we do what is right and just and true, or will we take another way? Will we live out the moral core of our faith, or will we cast it aside for the sake of expediency? Will we live into the relationship with God, or will we seek a different path to satisfaction and peace?

We have all heard the story of the Cherokee grandfather talking to his grandchild. *“A fight is going on inside me,” he said to the boy. “It is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves. One is evil - he is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego.” He continued, “The other is good - he is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. The same fight is going on inside you - and inside every other person, too.” The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather, “Which wolf will win?” The old Cherokee simply replied, “The one you feed.”*

This is the eternal conundrum - faced by us all. The people we saw raise an insurrection on Wednesday were not born with that level of hatred and rancor. They were indoctrinated into that level of acrimony and antagonism. They fed the wolf of anger, envy, resentment, inferiority, and lies. And, let's be clear: it has nothing to do with class or level of education achieved. Wealthy, Ivy-league educated people were rioting with those who are poorer and less educated. In fact, wealthy, Ivy-league educated people were inside the Capitol and White House inciting insurrection. No, those people on Wednesday's news were taught to hate, they learned to practice violence, they were educated in the ways of destruction.

Herod faced the conundrum and failed the test. His descendants faced the same test this past week and, at least for the moment, seem to have failed. They chose darkness over light. They chose division over unity. They chose chaos over order. They chose lies over truth.

Now is the time for God's people - who face the same conundrum - the same mystery - the same enigma - the same test - to practice great care in our choosing. It would be easy to render evil for evil, to dismiss those with differing political opinions as idiots and fools, to claim a moral superiority that makes us seem better than others.

But, and believe it or not, here is the good news: we are all - *all* - created in the image of God. That image is equally shared by Republicans, Democrats, Independents, African-Americans, Native Americans, Chinese Americans, Korean Americans, Arab Americans, Hispanic Americans, and all the subsets you might wish to name. That image is shared by Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Daoists, Wickens, and those who claim no religious connection. That image is shared by Gay, Lesbian, straight, bi-sexual, transgendered, and queer people. There is no distinction in humankind that erases the image of God in which we are all created.

We are called to bear witness that the same light, which guided wise people of old to the Light of the World, still shines and still leads to the perfection of God. We are called to live into that light that still shines in the darkness and which the darkness has not and cannot overcome. We are called to walk in the way of joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. And we are called to share that light with all people and invite them to join us on the journey.

Herod is alive and well. But so is the light of Jesus Christ.  
Let it shine, people of God. Let it shine!  
For now and evermore. Amen.



609 South East Second Street  
Evansville, IN 47713  
(812) 423-6297  
[www.firstpresevansville.com](http://www.firstpresevansville.com)

First Presbyterian Church  
is a partner congregation with  
the Covenant Network  
of Presbyterians.

