

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

January 8, 2006

Sermon Text: Matthew 2:1-12

Before I begin my sermon proper, I need to say that I will not be here for Open Gym Basketball tonight, not that I'll be missed that much, but I'm taking my daughter to a new college. She's transferring mid-year to Brevard, NC so I hope that someone here with a key will be here for basketball, and I do hope that we continue that tradition into the New Year. She's transferring to what's been called “The land of down vests and granola eaters.” I don't think that's a bad thing. It's just descriptive.

Anyway, Happy Epiphany! It's Epiphany week. It's Epiphany Sunday. What is Epiphany? Now, we know it has something to do with the Wise Men. I love the story about a little boy in a children's sermon, who said Epiphany was when the Wise Men brought the gifts to honor the Baby Jesus. The preacher foolishly asked the boy if he remembered what they brought. You never ask children anything in the children's sermon unless you are just ready to let loose and lose control. Well, the boy said confidently that yes, he did remember, “They brought gold, Frankenstein, and Smurfs!” That's what he heard.

Now, I know good church members can sit through years of worship without knowing what Epiphany is about. I know because I did! The first time that I had the word epiphany defined was not in church and not in a religion class. It was in college in a cellular biology class. Yes, biologists years ago used to use the word epiphany to describe the moment that an undifferentiated cell mass reveals what it is to become, the moment that it changes from raw potential into something concrete and definite. We now use the word epiphany to mean “sudden realization” or “insight.” You know, the coming together of facts that we have always known into one concrete idea, that moment of “Aha, I've had an epiphany!”

I remember I had an epiphany, a sudden realization. My very first one was when I was about age 12. All my life, all 12 years of my life, I had known for a fact that girls were yucky, and somewhere in my 12th year, I came to the realization, wait a minute, they're not so yucky anymore. When did this happen? It hit me all at once, and it's been neat doing youth work and confirmation classes down through the years. I can notice the very day when the boys buy a comb and start taking baths, and I know, they got a sudden realization that girls are no longer yucky.

It doesn't stop there. Along those lines, just a few years ago, I had a sudden realization, an epiphany if you will, that there was a direct relationship between my leaving socks all around the bedroom floor and Caroline's attitude toward me. My epiphanies are few and far between. You pray for her.

The church's meaning of Epiphany is that all at once, to this outsider, Gentile Wise Men, God was made known in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ, who was to be King of the Jews, but much more than that. God was at once revealed through signs in the heavens and through bits of Jewish prophecy to these outsiders, and through dreams that God gave these

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outsiders, these Gentiles. God was revealed and made manifest beyond Judaism to the Gentile world in the persons of the Wise Men, and that is what we celebrate today. That is Epiphany, how outsiders, these outside the covenant of Israel, like us, came to realize God in Christ. That is Epiphany.

It is also about the sad and violent world in which we live and are a part. In this often skipped over chapter, right after the Christmas story, we find the world and all its darkness edging in. You know, we would like a Christmas story to end the same way that cartoon special, “How the Grinch Stole Christmas,” ends. We would like the scrooges and the evil and the selfish and the violent to see what God has done in Christ, and have their tiny little hearts grow three sizes that day and let the grimaces melt away and be replaced with a smile, and feel love for everyone everywhere. We would like the revelation of God in Christ to be enough, and just leave it, as a babe in a humble manger, but the world, as it is, edges into the story!

It seems that when God acts to offer change and hope, the powerful parts of the world always push back and say, “We like things just as they are! Now, go away, God, and leave us alone!” I am remembered of God, the idea of leave us alone, I am reminded of God working through Moses to set Israel free from slavery and Egypt, and through Moses, God was showing sign after sign to Pharaoh, and giving Pharaoh chance after chance to respond that God was doing the new thing. As I read it, Pharaoh had an opportunity to have an epiphany of his own, and say, “Wait a minute! All these miraculous signs must mean something! Maybe God really does want me to let these people go.” Instead, powerful Pharaoh pushed back, and he ignored the signs, and eventually, Scripture says, his heart was hardened. Seemingly, he had a chance at one time, but after refusing and pushing back and saying, ‘No, I will not change, I will not respond to God’s call even though it is obvious.’ After saying, ‘Leave me alone’ time after time, God did. God did just that! When his heart was hardened and he no longer had any capacity for an epiphany, God left him alone. I have to wonder does that sort of thing still happen.

Back to the Wise Men. The Gentile outsider Wise Men coming to Jesus as King and Messiah were filled with hope, and they were bringing gifts, and that was not the end of the story though. That is how the story would end in the Bible if it were written as a 30-minute TV special. They would bring the gifts and that would be it, but it wasn’t. It wasn’t written to entertain us. It was written to tell us, once again, once again, that God has acted, offering hope and change in the darkness, and the worldly powers lift their noses, and they smell goodness in the air, and they begin to prowl to put it out.

God’s goodness, when it is made known, is a little bit like what happens when you turn on the lights late at night, and you see a few roaches scatter in the kitchen floor. That reminds me. Trustees, it’s time for another bug spray. You all have seen that somewhere, maybe at someone else’s house. God’s goodness causes one of two reactions. One, like the Magi, the Wise Men, in hope that something good and new has come into the world, they took off bringing the best they had as gifts to affirm this new

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thing God is doing. Now, that's one way to respond to the realization that God is doing a new thing, to run with hope toward God's goodness, to run with hope toward it, knowing you and the whole world need a change. Now, the other way is to run back into the dark. I'm not pointing at the choir for any particular reason. Back into the dark, and run with fear that God's goodness might look to change, to run away from hope because all you want to do is stay precisely the same, to run away because you do not want to change. To carry the analogy perhaps too far, you may be a diseased dirty little bug, but at least you know how to do that. Change is scary.

Spiritually-honest people know that the world is amiss, and everyone in it is broken in essential ways. People who know that look and pray for some sign that God is acting, and then when they see it, they run hoping for the light, running to the true light of God. They run hoping for love, true love of God, hoping for change because they know in their heart, they and the whole world need it. The Magi went looking with hope that God was offering needed change for the world.

Now, Herod, old Herod, was a totalitarian ruler, and even today, no matter what politics or faith they claim, totalitarian rulers will kill any potential threat to power. They do not want change. Though they live in fear and paranoia and darkness, at least, it's familiar. Fear and darkness are their comfort zones. None of us are totalitarian rulers, but too many of us do live in fear and darkness, and too many of us fear change most of all. Herod has had many parallels in history. Hitler defined the Jews as enemies, and then he sought to exterminate them. Radical Muslims define all those who think differently as enemies, and seek to destroy them. Stalin in Russia. Scholars argue whether he killed 50 million people or 10 million people, but he killed millions in the name of Communism and in the name of his own power. Saddam Hussein poison-gassed his own people in the Kurdish north and many others. Here in today's Scripture, we find the outrage of Herod ordering the murder of all the babies under two years old, the male babies, and the Christmas story taking a dark turn by Mary and Joseph and Jesus becoming refugees into Egypt to avoid Herod's paranoid plan to kill them.

Millions have died all through the centuries because tyrants will not have their power threatened, not even by God! Now does all this death mean that these men were extraordinarily evil, or does it mean something worse? Do we all have the potential for running into the darkness and refusing change? The worst question might be, if you and I had total unquestioned power, what would we do to threats? What would we do? Herod is just another example of paranoid leaders scurrying into the unthinkable darkness of murder. Imagine if you can, imagine your children, little two-year-olds or grandchildren, all the cute little babies, and imagine Herod, stone-faced and angry that the Magi did not return to him. Imagine Herod giving the order dispassionately, “I will not be threatened by any King, whether from another country or whether from God Himself! I will not have my will threatened! My will is to stay precisely the same! I have no light from God and I'll follow no stars, but if God seeks to do a new thing in my territory, I'll do what I can to snuff it out!” You need to know something, Herod the Great, he seemed pro-God. He seemed pro-religion. Herod added extensively to the temple in Jerusalem.

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In 1996, archeologists unearthed a wine jug used by King Herod. The inscription said, “Herod – King of the Jews.” Archeologist Amahai Mazar of Hebrew University says it’s the first time they saw the full title of Herod, the same Herod of Matthew, the second chapter. Where did they find it? On the very top of the mountain fortress known as Masada. Yes, Masada was built by the paranoid ruler Herod, a fortified fortress for himself and about a hundred others so that he could consolidate power safely on a mountaintop, he felt.

When we put a fortress around ourselves and have the desire to stay the same and to stay safe from God’s power to change, we have to know that God always gets through. History records that Herod also had his wife, one of his wives, and her two brothers killed because he suspected them of treason. It’s not surprise that Herod tried to kill Jesus. You see, under Roman law, Herod did have that title found on that wine jug. Herod had the title, King of the Jews, and so he had to take it very personally, as you can imagine, when the Wise Men said, “Where is He who is to be born, King of the Jews?” That was his title. He did not want things to change. If any of us comes in humility desiring God to change us, God will change us, our hearts first, on the inside, and then our lives and our priorities over time on the outside. We become new people.

The Herod types of the world remind me of a character from the play, “Three Penny Opera.” I’ll never forget a line from the play, “Three Penny Opera.” It has one little scene where there is a man in a very weakened physical condition sitting in a wheelchair with his family and doctors around him, and you don’t get the first part of the conversation, but you hear him screaming up at them. He says, “You don’t understand. I like to drink!” He didn’t want to change even though it had ruined his health. Do we have a little Herod in us? Do we want to stay the same? Do we scurry off when we begin to see the light, God’s light, God’s Holiness in Jesus Christ, when we really see it? Sometimes, it forces an epiphany, a moment, a sudden insight, where we understand, My Lord, if that is what I’m supposed to be, the life that you revealed in Jesus Christ, then I would have to give myself up completely to you, and God, if that is what I’m supposed to do, you’ll have to remake me from the bottom to the top. Yep! That’s it! Or we could run and hide, or even take the offensive against God, and speak disparagingly of Jesus’ Gospel and put down people of faith and call them simple-minded and stupid. We could do that!

There’s a joke about people who tried to keep the spirit of the Ten Commandments, to love God and love neighbor, the Golden Rule, written in ten separate lines. Some resist God and the hope of change fight ever so fiercely, not with murder, but with insults and barbs and put-downs from the edges of the dark. They fight anyone who does run toward the light as the Magi did and as Herod never would. No, the Magi were not really kings. We made that part of the tradition up. They were astrologists, and they saw in the skies that something new was coming, and they knew in their hearts that only God can make such huge changes, and they followed this moving star, I think, because the hope of change was what they were after. All at once, this new light gave them hope, and they

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dropped what they were doing, and they ran after it just as fiercely as Herod sought to put it out. God’s epiphany, God making Himself known in Jesus Christ creates a crisis, a crisis, where we must choose.

Now, there’s a story about a certain husband who was having a difficult time with his wife, from his point of view, and he decided on his own to get a divorce. He went to a lawyer friend for professional advice, and shared the entire story with his lawyer friend. He said, “What is the best thing I can do?” The attorney replied, “Well, the best thing you can do is to move back in with your wife and to apologize to her for all the harm you have done, and to work harder than ever before to make your marriage work.” After a long, deadly silence, the man asked, “What’s the second best thing I can do?” We are willing to do anything, anything but change!

A United Methodist Bishop tells a story about the time he presided over the annual conference gathered in the state of West Virginia. Now, the custom in those days was to have each preacher stand up and report how many conversions in his charge or his churches in the past year. As each preacher stood up to give his report, the Bishop was astonished. You know, preachers are not very good at counting. They don’t let me count attendance. I might count high. As each preacher gave his report, the Bishop was astonished, and finally the good Bishop counted all the conversions. He tallied up what all the pastors had reported, and he said, “I would estimate from tallying the record of conversions that y’all have reported, that you have converted more people than there are in the entire state of West Virginia.” That didn’t stop them. One preacher stood up, and said, “But Brother Bishop, down here, you have to convert people more than once.”

Now, maybe, maybe, the same is true here. I know God’s light still shines in the darkness, and I know it still creates a crisis of choice. How do we react? Choose, and if you’ve wandered off, choose again. Bring the best gift you have to God in Christ, the gift of your whole self, and receive the hope of change. God’s offer still stands. God’s Messiah can be the king of your heart. What God wants from you is all of you. What God wants from you is all of you. Amen.