

“THE MEANEST MAN IN THE WORLD”
MATTHEW 2:1-12

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University Church of Chicago
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When one of our city’s most famous residents was called to testify as an expert witness in a trial, Frank Lloyd Wright upon being sworn in and interrogated by the attorney for the plaintiff was asked, “What is your occupation?” He replied, “I am the world’s greatest architect.” When Mr. Wright and a young associate left the courtroom, the colleague gently reprimanded Wright. “Didn’t you think it a bit presumptuous to characterize yourself as the world’s greatest architect?” Wright turned and looked at him. “What else could I say? I was under oath!”

I have always been fascinated by those people who earn or who are given the title “greatest.” For example, the medieval king who conquered most of present-day Europe, Charles, who called himself Charlemagne, “Charles the Magnificent.” Or that Russian czar who not only called himself Peter the Great but also built and named a magnificent city on a swamp and named it St. Petersburg. And a saint he was not. Or that magnificent human specimen and boxer of our own time, Cassius Clay, a young man from Louisville, who changed his name to Muhammed Ali, and called himself “The Greatest.”

Then in the Bible there is Herod, whom the Romans called Great but Matthew simply calls Herod. He is central in today’s Gospel reading, renowned for a number of evil plans and slaughters in Matthew’s accounts. I have always been chagrined that Herod is remembered in the Christian calendar on December 28, my birthday, for the Slaughter of the Innocents, one of the most infamous days in history when he ordered the killing of every male child under the age of six, so that he thought he could be sure to kill the One whom the Magi came from the East seeking under the rubric, King of the Jews.

The Romans had named Herod King of the Jews, so when the Wise Men came seeking a newborn baby with that title, he naturally and quizzically responded, Hey! Wait! I am the King of the Jews! And Herod, who had already killed two of his own sons and one of his wives for trying to usurp his power, was not a man to be reckoned with in a struggle for eminence.

“And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.” So, as my wife is fond of saying, “There you have it.” They have spent two years on the road, chasing a star. They come this close to a run-in with one of the all-time nuts in the history of dictatorships. Finally, they find the infant they have been looking for. They fall on their knees, worship him, give him their Christmas presents—and go home.

Isn’t it possible that those Magi (and we don’t know how many there were—we only know they gave three different kinds of gifts to the Baby Jesus) were a bit perplexed as they rode their camels back to Persia or Syria or Assyria or perhaps India? They had expected pomp and circumstance, and they got a baby shower in a stinking stable.

It is that seeming dualism between the ordinary and the extraordinary that suffuses the birth narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. God, according to Luke, speaks in miraculous ways (through angels) to the most ordinary people in Palestine (shepherds in the fields near Bethlehem) telling them of God's sign to the nations (a poor baby born to peasants from Nazareth). Matthew's version is even grander: God reveals a sign, a star, to Magi from the East who come hundreds of miles on camels to lay expensive gifts at the baby's cradle, which is a hay manger in a cold, stinking stable.

Like the shepherds, the implication seems clear: these Magi come to the birth of the Messiah without fully understanding the signs given and the mission on which they are sent. Their naivete outranks their wisdom.

We've heard these stories so many times in Christmas pageants and sermons and lectures that their importance zings right over our consciousness. Yet, the question of the Wise Men sent Herod and the powers-that-be into apoplexy.

Herod the Great was undoubtedly the most powerful figure in first-century Palestine. Although he was an Idumean, a descendant from a group of shirt-tail Jewish relatives from the area southeast of the Dead Sea, the Romans, in an attempt to pacify the rebellious Palestinians, had given him his cherished title, "King of the Jews."

If you had picked up a copy of *The Jerusalem Times* in the first century, Herod and his family would have dominated the front page, "Inc." column and the business section. He built seventeen palaces throughout the land, each of them equipped with the latest technological innovations such as showers, swimming pools (in a country which today has only one public pool), and underground reservoirs. He built the magnificent city of Caesarea (the engineering genius of which amazes archaeologists 2000 years later) on the Mediterranean as well as his winter palace at Masada, which also served as an escape from the wrath of his mortal enemies Antony and Cleopatra, and—most spectacular of all—the Great Temple in Jerusalem.

The intrigues of adultery, murder, borrowed money, inflated debt and international alliances were enough to combine Donald Trump, Rupert Murdoch, Paris Hilton, Sam Zell, Sarah Palin, Karl Rove, Bernard Madoff and Britney Spears into one family, the Herods.

Matthew sets Herod and all his displays of power within the prophecies of the Hebrew Bible and the larger purposes of God. He renders Herod, for all his destructive power, finally powerless over the true king, Jesus, a lowly Nazarene baby born in Bethlehem. When Herod died, the Romans gave him a funeral which made Ronald Reagan's look like a Sunday School picnic. They carried Herod's body in a solid gold casket across the Judean wilderness and buried it in a very secret place—so secret that archaeologists, thieves and explorers have never found it—in one of his palaces which had been constructed by slaves, a place called the Herodium. You can still see it out there near Bethlehem.

What would you and I have done if we had been members of the University Church of Jerusalem

in the first century? Faced with all the destructive forces of evil and power, all the riches combined with indifference that always characterize empires and dictatorships? I will tell you what we would have done: we would have appointed a committee, commissioned a congregational survey, and looked at the marketing possibilities.

We would have called on the women and men who carry the five hundred dollar Louis Vuitton briefcases to check the real estate market in Jerusalem and Bethlehem, figure out how the current recession was going to affect giving and determine if there were enough potential new members to offset the loss caused if the preacher should ever preach a prophetic sermon and alienate a few members.

As that greatest and most intelligent of all American comedians, Fred Allen, once put it, “Money won’t buy happiness, but it will pay the salaries of a large research staff to study the problem.”

The question that confronts us in the year of our Lord 2009 is the same question that stared those people in Jerusalem and Bethlehem in the face in the year 7 B.C.E.: Are we, as St. Paul states the issue in the letter to the Romans, slaves to things as they are or are we God’s children? Yes, we are going to suffer if we are God’s children, if we follow the way of the Christ, but Paul assures us that is only in order that we may be glorified with Him. According to the world’s agenda, the time is never ripe for God’s work, Paul says.

When Tobruk fell in the beginning of the Second World War, a United Press correspondent chalked the defeat up to one ingredient: “lack of aggressiveness.” “No reflection on Allied troops,” he wrote. “They fought courageously and well. It was just that the general disposition was to wait and see what the enemy would do rather than to seize the initiative and attack.”

I knew that feeling every time I played racquetball—a sport I have very reluctantly had to forgo, because thirty years of banging into walls and floors ruined both my shoulders as well as my knees. When I let my opponent dominate center court, when I fell back and played a defensive game rather than an aggressive, take-it-to-him style, when I waited to see what the other guy was going to do, then I lost.

The church always has to find the tendency to think defensively, “a mighty fortress” mentality. We Methodists, like Presbyterians and Lutherans and other mainliners consider ourselves to be nice, liberal-minded, accommodating people. We abhor the tactics of the stand-on-the-corner-and-preach the Gospel methods, the wild singing and healing of the Pentecostals and the rigid theology of most of the evangelicals.

But Matthew puts the issue differently: when God’s children understand that the Herods of the world with all their power are ultimately powerless, then the Church can move forward in faith. The Church can never be defeated if it is following in the footsteps of its Lord.

In a piece in the *New Yorker* Atul Gawande cited a gripping story about a 1949 Montana forest fire that engulfed a parachute brigade of firefighters. Panicking, they ran, trying to make it up a seventy-six-percent grade and over a crest to safety. But their commander, a man named Wag

Dodge, saw that it wasn't going to work. So he stopped, took out some matches and set the tall, dry grass ahead of him on fire. The new blaze caught and rapidly spread up the slope. He stepped into the middle of the burned-out area it left behind, lay down, and called out to his crew to join him. He had invented what came to be called an "escape fire," and it later became a standard part of Forest Service training.

His men, however, either thought he was crazy or never heard his calls, and they ran past him. All but two were caught by the inferno and perished. Inside his escape fire, Dodge survived virtually unharmed.

The organization had unravelled. The men had lost their ability to think coherently, to act together, to recognize that a lifesaving idea might be possible. This is what happens, Dr. Gawande writes, to all flawed organizations in a crisis. That is what is happening to our cities. That is what is happening to too many mainline churches.

When we begin to let God's Holy Spirit help us think in new, creative ways, and when we have faith to go home by another road and when we have the guts to measure how successful (or how failing) we are, and when we use the vast resources God has given us, then we can defeat the Herods of this world.

In Jane Smiley's wonderful novel, *A Thousand Acres*, she characterized a Midwestern family: "We went to church every Sunday to pay our respects, not to give thanks." "Going to church," said Laurence Peter, "does not make you a Christian any more than going to a garage makes you a car."

Heinrich Heine, the great German poet, was standing one day before the Cathedral of Amiens in France. "Tell me, Heinrich," his friend asked, "why can't people build piles of stone like this any more?"

"My dear friend," replied Heine, "in those days people had convictions. We moderns have opinions. And it takes more than an opinion to build a Gothic cathedral."

We are practical people, we Disciples and UCCs and Presbyterians and Methodists. We know where the power lies, or at least we think we do. We are well acquainted with the Herods who control the world these days. Anybody who lives in an environment that spawns the Bulls, the Bears, the Cubs and the White Sox has to possess a certain amount of apprehension and fear.

But God calls us to confront not only the possibilities but also the impossibilities of our lives. God calls us to be faithful. And trusting in God's will. Like the Magi, we don't always understand what God has put before us, and often we have to go home by another, less well-marked road.