

I imagine the headline on the news page of the first century, the Jerusalem Post equivalent, “Wise men from the east seek the place of the Messiah’s birth, and Herod responds with the massacre of the innocents.” It was not only Herod the despot who got it wrong, who was convinced of the problem or the suspicion about the newborn, but the whole of Jerusalem was frightened too.

Though the term ‘magi’ could be heard as a pejorative reference to magicians or sorcerers, their appearance is described here positively. Indeed they are pious seekers after the “king of the Jews.” They were astrologers who read the heavens and advised rulers about their future. Of course, they were in a precarious position, for if their message was too demanding on the people in power, they could pay a heavy price.

As it turns out, Herod was a rather irrational leader. History tells us that when Herod was frightened, heads rolled, people died. His paranoia led to more and more extreme actions as he tried to secure his throne from all threats.

Herod was frightened by the idea that a child would take power from him. Seeing an opportunity to eliminate another possible claimant to the throne, Herod tried to turn the magi into his emissaries by holding a secret meeting to enlist their help. But the magi were wiser than Herod, they could see Herod’s true motives. Instead, they sought out the Christ child, knelt down to pay him homage and departed in the opposite direction far from Herod’s levers of power.

Herod had called together the religious leaders to tell him where such an epiphany of God-the birth of “the king of the Jews” might take place. They correctly identified from Scripture the prophesied location, Bethlehem of Judea, but these spiritual followers clearly showed no interest in seeing or meeting a living God in their own time. They were at the center of power where they were doing quite well and they had no concern for what was happening at the margins.

But in this epiphany, this manifestation, God was not operating at the center of power but on the margins, not in Jerusalem, paralyzed by fear, but in a small village known to be a gathering place for the shepherds, not royalty. We see that from the beginning Jesus is among the everyday world of trouble and pain. The Gospel truth is that he came among us to share every experience of our common life. As a matter of fact, when the baby grew up and became a man, most saw him as a revolutionary and a troublemaker.

It is perhaps unfortunate that we make the manger scene so charming and quaint in our Christmas Eve portrayals. Normally we bring the shepherds and lambs, the wise men and their gifts up around a costumed Mary and Joseph and close the scene with “Silent Night.” This is perhaps the sanitized version suitable for children. But, if we stop there, we have not told the whole story and maybe not even the most important part-ugly and threatening though it may be. The next piece of the story is the quick departure of the Mary, Joseph, and Jesus ‘under threat’ to Egypt. The Holy Family was not insulated from the cruel realities of a sinful world. The scripture lesson from Matthew today tells the whole Christmas Story and truth about humankind’s reaction to God’s gift of Jesus Christ.

There is always a mixed reaction to God's coming in Jesus Christ to bring the true light in the world to dispel the darkness of sin and apostasy. The Wise Men bowed down and worshipped the infant who would grow to be the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Herod, the present worldly king, sought to put the child to death. The truth is quite evident--wherever the good news of the Gospel is preached it will always have its enemies. How many times is it revealed in the pages of the Bible that it is the demons and the powers of evil and darkness who first recognized Jesus Christ. The love of God when it is expressed to include the love of the entire human family will always arouse hatred before hospitality. Like Herod, at times the Gospel message attacks our own personal kingdoms and convictions. Truth doesn't always come easy.

This morning I would like to share a story from a book titled, *The Whispers of Christmas* by Dr. Joe E. Pennel, Jr. Dr. Pennel writes: "Whenever and wherever the message of Christ is taken into the world, there is the possibility that it will be met with rejection. I was Pastor in Memphis, Tennessee, when Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was shot while standing on the balcony of a downtown motel. I learned of the shooting when our black custodian interrupted the finance committee meeting by shouting, "Dr. King has been shot, Dr. King has been shot!" The next morning's issue of *The Commercial Appeal*, our local newspaper urgently called the clergy of the city to a meeting. "Pastors representing every racial, cultural, and educational level in the city gathered for a mass meeting which had been called by the bold headlines of the city newspaper. Reverend James Lawson, a friend of Dr. King's and an effective pastor in South Memphis, read the Old Testament lesson. The local Greek Orthodox priest read from the New Testament and symbolically kissed the feet of Mr. Lawson. Reverend Frank McRae, a courageous leader in the United Methodist Church, spoke about hope in the midst of despair.

"After a session of Bible study, prayer, and speaking, the clergy decided to march en masse to the office of Mayor Henry Loeb, as a symbol of love and reconciliation. We wanted the Mayor to reconsider his opposition to the striking sanitation workers as a symbol of repentance and love. "After leaving the sanctuary, we formed ourselves in lines two abreast and started walking toward the city hall. Just before we had completed one block of our march a young deacon from St. Mary's ran back into the church and brought out the processional cross which was commonly used on Sunday morning for the worship service. With humility and yet boldness, he put himself at the head of the processional now aimed at the city's seat of power. As we walked, television cameras descended upon us. Reporters from New York to California started pumping us with questions about our motives and how we felt about what had happened the night before.

"When our journey was about half completed, an older woman started yelling from a second floor apartment window. Because of the traffic, the cameras, the reporters, and the noise, her speech was, at first, inaudible. As I drew closer to the flower-boxed window, I could hear the anger of her shrill voice: "The cross belongs in the church! The cross belongs in the church! I am a member of St. Mary's. Take the cross back to the church where it belongs." Her secure kingdom, like Herod's was being threatened. And she responded not with homage, but with fear and with rejection."

Reactions to God have always been mixed. Secondly, this story demonstrates that sometimes people love the darkness and try to extinguish the light--but the light of Christ is an everlasting light. It is there for us to follow, to re-examine time and time again, not to erase from the pages of the human drama and human story.

What is there about our secure kingdom that we live within that needs to be penetrated by the light of Christ and changed? What do we need to be re-examining on this cusp of the New Year?

The United Church Observer magazine celebrated its 190<sup>th</sup> Anniversary this year, by being rebranded as the magazine “Broadview”. A couple of years ago, then editor, David Wilson set out in an editorial both a celebration of the heritage of the publication- incidentally the oldest continuously published magazine in North America, but also a recognition that our history is rarely clean, that organizations that have been around for a long time almost always have to live with contradictions. He cites the founder of the magazine, Egerton Ryerson, who in 1829 saw the need for a publication that would link members of the Methodist Church in Upper Canada, while carrying a torch for religious and civil liberty.

While we celebrate Ryerson’s crucial role in establishing the public school system in a young and growing country, we cannot celebrate that he too helped lay the foundation for a dark chapter in Canadian history, the Indian Residential School system. We as a church have turned away from the cultural, racial, and religious chauvinism that informed the views of that time. Our journey has taken us in another direction. Our country has also acknowledged the mistakes of that system with an apology from the Prime Minister.

Our practises and beliefs should be informed by all that God has given us-our minds, our hearts, our experience, and the history of our faith informs these understandings.

Eleven years ago a young aboriginal man, by the name of Bradley Martin ended his own life. In the northern British Columbia community that was home to Bradley there was still an understanding brought by Christian missionaries over a century before that those who committed suicide should not be given a proper burial. Bradley’s father, Willard is a Nisga’a nation chief and a graduate of the west coast seminary, Vancouver School of Theology. Willard insisted on giving his son the dignity of a Christian burial and settlement feast.

The principal from the theological college went to the community to support Willard in his courage and his wisdom, and to honour the life of his son. The principal, Wendy Fletcher, was asked to participate in the liturgy, she was also cautioned that there might be very few attending the funeral, as it was breaking with cultural practice. However, hundreds came from the native community. When the Eucharist (Anglican communion) was celebrated, every single person came forward to receive.

The principal walked with the priest ahead of the casket to the graveside. Wendy looked back and saw ten beautiful young native men carrying their friend. They left the church and walked the distance, refusing to put their friend down until the grave was reached. With tears screaming down their faces they walked and walked; behind them hundreds of Bradley’s people walked with him his last mile. Then they stood around the open grave and Wendy was passed the prayer book and asked by the priest, “You commit him to God for us.”

As they all stood there hearing the familiar words of committal, The principal had the sense that they were suffering together, hoping together past the stain of an incredibly wounding history, Wendy sensed that the healing of God was taking place. She says, “I saw the healing water of God’s grace was pouring out to all corners of the earth and

nothing was beyond its reach.” They walked a journey to that grave, but they left as different people because of what they had experienced through the gift of Bradley’s life and death.

Our ancestors have drawn inspiration from a familiar hymn with these words-  
“And though this world, with devils filled, should threaten to undo us, we will not fear,  
for God hath willed the truth to triumph through us: the prince of darkness grim, we  
tremble not for him, his rage we can endure, for lo! his doom is sure, one little word shall  
fell him.” (A Mighty Fortress is Our God)

That word, that reality is Christ. No wonder Herod reacted in the manner he did. Like  
Joseph and the Wisemen, let us hear anew the revelation of God--that we also can flee the  
powers of darkness and be led by the light of God's presence, to live a life of compassion  
and justice, in so doing finding a safe harbour and another way.  
Amen, Amen.

Acknowledging inspiration from-  
Dr. Maxie Dunnam, Senior Minister, Christ United Methodist Church, Memphis,  
Tennessee, "The Pastor's Column," The Courier Edition of the United Methodist  
Reporter, December 14, 1990.  
Perspectives, VST, November, 2008