

Collins Street Baptist Church

Summer Worship: Prayers & Readings

Sunday January 3

Introduction

For many, the week after Christmas is a slow one. In pandemic-time, this may be especially so – with opportunities for travel vastly reduced. Perhaps it provides us with an opportunity for reflection. What have we learned and how might we now live? What did we lose and what did we gain? Amidst all that was unwelcome in 2020, what did we experience as a gift?

Prayer

Ever-present God,

For so many, 2020 was a long, hard year. We honour those who sacrificed and lost, those who gave and worked, those who felt alone and tired, those whose plans all changed.

We acknowledge that we missed out on many things: gathering for worship, travelling to other places, appreciating live music and theatre and other expressions of creativity, being with others in the usual ways. We acknowledge the economic hardship experienced by so many, and the toll of all of this on our wellbeing.

What does it look like for you to be with us as we rebuild and restart God?

We sense there are lessons to be learned and approaches to be changed. What are they God?

We expect that some things have changed forever while others will soon return to the way they were.

How might we make wise choices in these new days?

God of wisdom,

who is beyond us yet with us,

who knows the vast and intricate wisdom of the universe and yet sits beside us on this ordinary day:
speak to us of newness as we imagine the days ahead.

Speak to us of wisdom and knowledge – the kind forged in our lived experience in this world.

Speak to us of hope – the kind deeper and fuller and more lived-in than optimism.

Speak to us of peace – the kind that is full of goodness, and not simply devoid of conflict.

Speak to us of joy – the kind that perseveres through hardship and is truly enduring.

Speak to us of faith – the kind that does not require certitude or power, but is willing to journey with you and others through these uncertain yet sacred days.

Amen.

Scripture Reading – Matthew 2. 14-23

Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, ‘Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.’¹⁴ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt,¹⁵ and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, ‘Out of Egypt I have called my son.’

16 When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men.¹⁷ Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

¹⁸ ‘A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.’

19 When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said,²⁰ ‘Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child’s life are dead.’²¹ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel.²² But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee.²³ There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, ‘He will be called a Nazorean.’

Reflection

(This reflection, by Carolyn’s friend Heidi Haverkamp, an Episcopal priest in the USA, was originally published in *The Christian Century*)

At a family Christmas service years ago, I sat down on the floor at the front of the church, like you do, and read a book with the kids, retelling the story of Jesus’ birth according to Luke. We looked at the pictures and talked about what was happening, and a couple of kids asked loud and funny questions, enjoying how the adults in the congregation laughed and smiled at what they said. But one of the smallest boys, in a very quiet voice the other adults couldn’t quite hear, sat right in front of the book and asked me the same question, over and over: on each page, he would point to someone and ask me, “Is that a bad guy?”

At first I answered, “No, that’s a shepherd,” or “No, that’s just a person,” but after a few pages I had to start ignoring him. The thing is, there aren’t really any bad guys in Luke’s version of the nativity.

In Matthew’s version, however — there is one very bad guy: Herod the Great. As you read Matthew 2, he sounds stomach-churningly familiar: a classic tyrant, paranoid, ready to use lies and violence against any threat to his power. The Bible doesn’t mention this, but by the time of the birth of Jesus, he’d

already killed many people he saw as threats, including his second wife, Mariamne I, and three of his own sons.

The Epiphany is often told or preached as a story about a long journey, or about the light of Christ leading and guiding us, or about God's welcome to gentiles and people of all nations to worship and know Jesus. But this year I can't help but read it as a story about power: the depraved, fearful power of King Herod, what it drives him to do, and what a contrast his power is to the power of Jesus. Jesus is a very different kind of king.

As a young adult in the 1990s, I didn't believe in evil. Or at least, evil seemed like something that existed somewhere else or that was exaggerated by people who didn't know any better. But gradually, I read more history. I followed world news more carefully. Then, in seminary, I met someone who talked about evil in a way I'd never experienced before. She was a prison chaplain, and she told me that she had developed relationships with many prisoners, finding goodness and intelligence in them despite their brokenness, mental illness, or rage. But there were a few—and one in particular—who, she told me, had shocked her God-is-love sensibilities to shreds. One particular man exuded an energy she found hard to describe, yet he also seemed empty to her, like a vacuum; in any case, she told me that “evil had done its work” on him. She was the first person I'd ever heard talk about evil in this way, as a real force in the world. Most of my liberal Protestant friends and mentors never talked like that.

The longer I live, the more often I see evil overpower good, the strong exploit the weak, and bad guys crowd out the good guys, whether in the present or through the annals of human history. Still, I am not sure I believe that some people are simply the bad guys. Human experience and human brains are complicated. Hurt people hurt people, as the saying goes. But just as I believe Jesus is real, I believe evil is real—even if I'm not quite sure what it is.

And just as power and authority can amplify goodness and mercy, so too they can amplify fear and anger into forces with much broader, more penetrating destruction and harm.

The power of Herod is brutal, reactive, and paranoid. Like my little kiddo in church on Christmas Eve, Herod sees bad guys everywhere he looks. But the power of God is not like that. What if, in fact, God's power is just the opposite? What if the Son of God is, in fact, no match for a son of the gods, whether Caesar or Herod or Thor? Because the power of God is not like the power of superheroes, street fighters, or avenging angels. Instead, according to the Gospels and the letters of Paul, the power of God is subversive, vulnerable, and life-giving. What if the power of God is not a takeover or a massacre but seeking and finding, going home by another way, second chances, and the spreading of good news like seeds, near and far, good news that changes people not from the top down but from the bottom up?

We are living through a time when many people seem to wish that the power of God would be more like the power of Herod. It's a time when many people are looking for bad guys. But when churches or human beings try to wield God's power as though it were a cudgel instead of a handful of seeds, a baby, or a cross, we tend to get things like the Crusades and the Inquisition. The story of the Epiphany—and all of the Christmas story—is the beginning of a long story about how God uses power in Jesus not to overpower us but to dwell among us and love through us.

Blessing

May God, who led the magi by the shining of a star
to find the Christ, the Light from light,
lead you also in your pilgrimage to find the Lord.

May God, who accompanied Jesus and Mary and Joseph during their escape to Egypt,
travel with you to difficult places,
teaching you, guiding you, never forsaking you.

And may the light of the good news shine in your hearts
and fill your lives with his joy and peace.

Amen.
