

Grace, mercy & peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Christ child is still suckling at Mary's breast and already it has begun. Only last Sunday we sang Mary's prophetic words about God's reversal of fortunes for rich and poor, powerful and powerless, oppressed and oppressor in the *Magnificat*. ***This morning we witness the almost immediate clash between the mighty on their thrones and God.*** Because once King Herod discovers from the Magi that God is about the business of sending the new king of the Jews, Jesus' days of anonymous safety disappear.

Suffice it to say that the institution of sovereign reign by humans – having a king – rarely seems to be in step with God's will or God's vision for a kingdom. A man elevated to his royal station by none other than the Romans, ***Herod the great*** offers no great surprise here when he seeks to destroy the Christ child. Later, the Jewish ruling council, the ***Sanhedrin***, will plot to destroy him. Certainly, ***Annas and Caiaphas***, agree that it is better for Jesus to die for the good of the people. Later still, ***Pontius Pilate and Herod Antipas***, the tetrarch (Son of Herod the Great) will bat Jesus back and forth hoping to be rid of the problem he presents, but not wanting to be responsible for his death.

It seems that this Jesus makes people in positions of power, authority, wealth and influence very nervous around. ***So it is that no atrocity is too distasteful to rid themselves of God's chosen King.*** Whether it be by murdering innocent infants in and around Bethlehem to be rid of the threat of a king who suckles at his mother's breast, or nailing an innocent and righteous rabbi to a cross in order to avoid any threat to their

positions of control – that is of no matter.

Our Gospel text describes at least Herod the Great's reaction as Fury. He was infuriated that he had been duped by the wisemen. That fury translated into the indiscriminant killing of anyone who might be the threat. *No reasons to consider, reflect, think, or count the cost just send soldiers to kill.*

Viewed from a biblical perspective Herod's behavior as a king is nothing if not average. Self-serving behavior among human leaders qualifies as the rule rather than the exception, though there have always been those who cannot help but outdo themselves in this regard.

Scripture's first significant encounter with a king recounts, *Pharaoh of Egypt* perpetrating a nearly identically heinous act of infanticide – baby killing – on the Hebrew people because of the mere possibility of their growing strength threat. Fear leads leaders to act out, lash out, stamp out any possible threat.

The very same self-serving behavior is chronicled among the kings of God's own people. So long as they are wandering or dependent upon God for conquering the Promised Land God's sovereign leadership is honored. But no sooner than the children of Israel are established as a nation and have their own self-interest to look after they insist that the prophet Samuel anoint a king over them so that they can be like all the nations around them. God reluctantly allows human kings for Israel, knowing that it will fail miserably: *Read 1 Samuel 8:10-18 if you doubt God's prediction.*

The rest of the Old Testament – fully 2/3 – describe *prophets repeatedly calling God's people back to God's rule*, because time and again *the kings of*

Israel and Judah bringing calamity upon the people by their self-serving, self-perpetuating leadership.

Walter Bruggemann in his insightful book *Prophetic Imagination* suggests three characteristics of the corruption of society under the decaying influence of self-interested human rule, which the biblical witness recounts over and over again. In such societies: **(1)** God's economics of equality is replaced with *the economics of affluence*; **(2)** God's demand for justice is replaced by a *politics of oppression of the powerless*; and **(3)** the true religion of God's freedom and sovereignty is countered with *a religion of God's accessibility – translation, God is on our side, my side.*

We cannot help, but *feel the sting of these marks* of a society living under leaders who have usurped God's place because we cannot deny that *all of these exist and seem to be growing in our society.* I have been taught my whole *no choice but to admit that I have learned to think that this system is fair, just, equitable, and pleases God.* But in light of the critique our texts offer this morning it seems that perhaps that *we need to reevaluate* our views based not on human practicalities, but upon God's sovereign reign. Otherwise we may already be allied with Pharaoh, Saul, Ahaz, Solomon, Herod and the rest.

Corrupt human rule does everything at its disposal without consideration of how many, babies, refugees, citizens or allies get hurt in the process. We all know this playbook. It is engraved over and over again in the annals of human history. *The decline of kingdoms and civilizations inevitably follows in societies where the people adopt the arrogance and fake superiority of their leader's self-serving ideals*

ascribing to themselves a national superiority and entitlement that doesn't exist. We never seem to learn that this "*Us before everyone else, me before everyone else*" attitude always ends badly.

Fortunately, there is another way, and even in Jesus infancy we can see how God's kingdom chooses a different path. Whereas Herod confronts, destroys, and kills to preserve himself, God doesn't confront, but protects, does not engage evil with evil, and lives to love for another day. The angel has Joseph, Mary and Jesus run away to Egypt.

In so doing, Matthew portrays Jesus as reliving the history of God's chosen people over again. Fleeing to Egypt, being safely delivered home, giving a new law; love the God and your neighbor as yourself. Instead of violence, Jesus exercises tolerance; instead of exploitation Jesus demonstrates generosity, instead of the threat to wound Jesus demonstrates God's desire for healing; rather than hoarding everything Jesus feeds the hungry. Not too many human dynasties have endured for 2000 years, but this one has. God's kingdom persists and endures because regardless of what may be going on around them God's sovereign – Jesus – chooses to build up, rather than tear down; to give rather than take; to offer new life rather than taking life.

When push comes to shove, Jesus does not serve Himself at the expense of other people, He serves people at His own expense – even when that means refusing to return violence for violence, hatred for hatred, betrayal for betrayal. Jesus lives the way of God's kingdom to the very end, and though He dies, God raises Him so He can be servant King to a servant people, who live as Jesus lived and taught.

The Good News this First Sunday after Christmas is that we need no longer subscribe to the politics of self-interest, scarcity, and exploitation.

For in this Christ child God has provided us with a righteous King – a king under whose rule all are cared for, all are loved, and valued – a king under whom we may live under a vision of compassion, mercy, forgiveness, and love.

In the words of Psalm 95 which is quoted in the Lutheran Matins liturgy:

For the Lord is a great God and a great king above all gods... Oh, come let us bow down and bend the knee, and kneel before the Lord our Maker.

For he is our God and we are the people of His pasture.

AMEN!!!