

THE EAGLE AND THE STAR

a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on Jan.1, 2023

based on Matt. 2:13-23

This morning I will pick up the story where we left off a week ago, on Christmas eve.

Consider ... if the shepherds had wanted to, they could have made it to Jerusalem by morning following the birth of Jesus. It's only six miles from little Bethlehem to the city.

Once there they would have seen the temple standing white and bright like a mountain covered with snow. It would have looked to be on fire because of the burnished gold atop the columns of the sanctuary that would have picked up the morning light.

Not long after dawn, business at the temple would be in full swing which was a huge deal, I mean, the whole thing covered twenty-five acres.

The Court of the Gentiles would be loud. Lots of people from all over would have crowded in there. They accepted most anyone, including shepherds, but excluded those considered to be lepers, victims of venereal disease and others considered unclean. How they could tell who they should exclude isn't exactly clear.

Anyway, in the shadow of twenty-seven foot columns, anyone could buy doves or pigeons suitable for casual offerings. Those in charge of changing money there would have been busy serving Jews who'd arrived from Egypt or Babylon. They'd be carrying foreign currency.

You would have heard many different dialects of Greek and Aramaic spoken. Add to that, the sound of cattle and sheep awaiting slaughter, not too different from the sounds of the Bethlehem stable.

Just climb fourteen more semicircular steps and you would find the Court of the Women where Jesus' parents would soon bring their baby for blessing.

Not even the most saintly of women would be allowed to enter the next level of sanctity – the Court of Men.

Those allowed in there were dwarfed by fifty foot Corinthian columns. From this place Jewish men could watch the activities in the Court of the Priests. Lambs were butchered there twice daily on a huge altar.

This was the place where it was believed that Abraham had prepared to sacrifice his son Isaac, but instead sacrificed a lamb.

In Jesus day the blood drained into a sophisticated plumbing system complete with running water so no trace of blood remained.

Behind the altar stood the great white sanctuary with even higher pillars and a huge cypress door adorned with an incredible Babylonian tapestry made of blue, red, purple and flaxen colored cloth.

The temple was the crowning achievement of the 33 year reign of King Herod. Herod "The Great" he was called. He was born in the northernmost province of Idumea of a family that had only been Jewish for two generations. For this reason he was not trusted by the Jewish populace who saw him for what he was, a pawn of Imperial Rome.

Herod's desire was to drag these tradition bound Jews into a modern cosmopolitan world: thus the introduction of the Babylonian Tapestry, the Greek columns, the countless Roman marble stairs.

Now, what of all these Gentile touches in a holy Jewish temple? Well, everyone but the most conservative Jews overlooked them – everything except for one decoration: over the gate of the Court of the Gentiles stood an Eagle. the central symbol of Roman might. Herod did his best to remind the conservatives that the eagle was a symbol dear to Jews as well but no one bought that.

Somewhere around the time of Jesus birth, two young Pharisees named Mattathias and Judah were insensed by this. Along with forty other studious, idealiastic Jews, they hoisted ropes and pulled the eagle down, shattering it on the marble below.

Herod threw the lot of them in prison with the following advisory: believing he was dying, he left strict orders that at the moment of his death they were to be executed. In this way he thought to insure that the city would be thrown into mourning and no one would be able to say the wailing wasn't, maybe, for Herod himself.

Pathetic, eh?

Now, while Herod's Eagle, was coming down, tradition says that another symbol, a great star, was being raised ever so silently a dozen miles away over Bethlehem.

So, think about it -- Herod "The Great" is dying. He had killed one wife and three of his sons out of paranoia. Now, close to death, he is **still** paranoid about who might unseat him.

Sounds like Vladimir Putin who, rumor says, is ill with a serious form of blood cancer and *still apparently*, busys himself daily with having his critics thrown out of hotel windows all over the world. It's an old story.

Mathew claims Herod the king even fears a little baby born in little two-bit Bethlehem.

Some would eventually call that baby King of the Jews. But he would be an odd king. Not very royal, he would grow up to say things like, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."

Yes, and "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls for my yoke (unlike Rome's yoke) is easy, and my burden is light."

St. Francis de Sales who understood the heart of Jesus like few others is remembered to have said, "Nothing is as strong as real gentleness; nothing is as gentle as real strength."

That is the new dispensation ushered in by the star.

I wonder if old dying Herod, sitting in Jerusalem, knew an era was fading. He would soon fall and Rome too. Okay, it would take several hundred years, but that was coming; some could smell it in the air.

Remember the news video we all saw from China years ago during the Tiananmen Square uprising --- an idealistic young man armed with nothing more deadly than a shopping bag, standing in front of a line of tanks.

China's leadership has done everything they can to obliterate that image from it's people's memory. But I tell you, any government that doesn't recognize the moral character behind that defiance is coming down, eventually.

History tells us that a meter is running on that kind of programmed injustice.

In the story we heard read this morning, King Herod (threatened by talk of a new king) orders the killing of all the boy babies around the little town just beyond the suburbs of Jerusalem.

Well, down through the ages innumerable kings and dictators have ordered the massacre of children. It is all so much in contrast with "O Little Town of Bethlehem, how still we see they lie."

So, Matthew's Christmas pageant ends not with angels proclaiming goodwill, but these lines Matthew borrows from the prophet, Jeremiah -- "A voice is heard in Ramah, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more."

Matthew's idea is this -- Herod was no fool. He had been in power long enough to be able to tell a rival when he saw one.

What poor shepherds saw as an innocent baby, Herod knew as a threat to everything on which his kingdom was based.

So Herod, as Matthew depicts him, joins all the other leaders of our age, Hitler, Pol Pot, Stalin, Mao, Milosevic, Putin; all men who don't mind a little murder in order to silence those courageous enough to speak truth to power.

The powerful are always wanting to silence the brave who will expose them for who they really are.

Now, of course, we don't like this part of the Christmas story. Well, we don't mind a few bad guys in Christmas, as long as they're as tamable as the Grinch or Ebenezer Scrooge.

And, you know, it's not an accident that in Hans Christian Anderson's story of *The Emperor's New Clothes*, it's a child who says what all the adults are afraid to say – that the emperor is naked.

Remember the child who was specifically targeted in Pakistan: Malala Yousefzai -- targeted for pointing out the moral nakedness of the misogyny in her country?

She once said, "I don't want to be thought of as 'the girl who was shot by the Taliban' but 'the girl who fought for education.' This is the cause to which I want to devote my life."

Remember when she was on the Daily Show with John Stewart? He asked her how she could go on speaking out on behalf of children, girl children, after being shot by a member of the Taliban, knowing she could easily be shot again, and this time, die. Here is what she said,

I used to think that the Talib would come, and he would just kill me. But then I said, 'If he comes, what would you do Malala?' then I would reply to myself, 'Malala, just take a shoe and hit him.'

But then I said, 'If you hit a Talib with your shoe, then there would be no difference between you and the Talib. You must not treat others with cruelty. . . you must fight others through peace and through dialogue and through education.' Then I said I will tell him how important education is and that 'I even want education for your children as well.' And I will tell him, 'That's what I want to tell you, now do what you want.'

She went a bit further ... "We realize the importance of our voices only when we are silenced."

That's the answer to all the Talibs, and Putins and Herods in the world.

Remember St. Francis de Sales -- "Nothing is as strong as real gentleness; nothing is as gentle as real strength."

Shortly after Malala was shot, five million Pakistani men, women and children signed petitions calling for every girl in Pakistan to have the chance to go to school. Five million.

The same thing is happening in Iran now. The meter is running on the abuse the Islamic republic there is heaping on its women and its children, too.

Here is a bit of news from there from Thursday.

It takes a special kind of coward to kill a child and steal the body. To execute someone, and only tell their family afterward. To shoot at people chanting the word "freedom," and shut off the internet in hopes that no one will find out. In the last three months, the Islamic Republic of Iran has done all of this and more. If you are born a girl, from the age of nine, you must wear a headscarf everywhere you go. You cannot dance in public, and if you are a woman, you cannot sing either. You cannot hang out with anyone of the opposite gender who you are not directly related to (and under the Islamic Republic, there are only two genders). Same-sex relationships are illegal, and leaders pretend that gay people do not exist.

The leadership there continues to act with impunity, as if their acts were sanctioned by God.

Well, Herod and his henchmen thought they had it all taken care of, too.
How wrong they were.

Tradition says that Joseph, Jesus' dad, at an angel's instructions, hunkered down in Egypt until word came again from the angel that Herod was dead.

The eagle was coming down – the star was on the rise.

Other eagles, even in this country are falling – being exposed for the phonies they are. The truth has taken a lot of hits in the past few years but the last 6 months has exposed a lot of that to the light.

Remember the words of Mahatma Gandhi. They may not be 100% right, but they're close enough I think. They give me hope and I want hope in a new year. Let me close with them.

"When I despair, I remember that all through history the way of truth and love has always won. There have been tyrants and murderers, and for a time they can seem invincible, but in the end they always fall . . .

Think of it. . . Always." *

Amen

* It's true that the murdering monster, Joseph Stalin, died quietly in his sleep, but it should be noted he was roundly repudiated afterward.