

Epiphany Sunday
January 2, 2022
Southampton, MA

Scripture: Matthew 2:1-12

The question, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?” had two sides. Whereas the wise men sought directions, Herod heard it as a threat.

Jesus’ birth took place towards the end of Herod’s 33-year reign. By then, his rule was in disarray primarily due to the ways he maintained power. Though Herod was Jewish, he had very little legitimacy in the eyes of his subjects.

Herod could not rule Palestine without Caesar’s support. Very early in his political life, he lost his position in the Hasmonean uprising around 40 BCE. Assisted by the Roman army, he returned to power in 37. Undoubtedly, this shaped his governance.

Fear defined his reign. He feared losing power, which would mean losing his wealth and prestige. He would lose his identity. Consequently, he used various schemes to hold it. Knowing he owed his power to Caesar, he undertook a massive building program to honor him, including building the port city of Caesarea. He greatly expanded the Jerusalem Temple’s plaza to curry favor with Jews. He married Mariamme, a Hasmonean, to forge an alliance.

Despite his efforts, suspicions and insecurities plagued him. He ruthlessly used his power to retain it. He had his brother-in-law killed and imprisoned his mother-in-law. Even though he passionately loved his wife, his suspicions led him to murder her. Later, when his sons raised their anger over their mother’s death, Herod had them killed as well. His ruthlessness even extended to his funeral. Fearing that his death would trigger celebrations, he had several distinguished people executed so the general public would mourn.

His brutal use of power probably led Matthew to acknowledge it in the slaughter of the innocents. (2:16) Fear with the power to act on those fears leads to destruction.

Herod used his power for no other purpose than to serve himself and those close to him. Nevertheless, he destroyed the people close to him as his fear made him draw his circle even tighter around him. His existential threat was fear, which destroyed him, too.

Like the wise men's question, power has two sides as well.

Herod was the example of power in this world. Jesus was the example of power in God's world. Fear animated Herod's power. Love animated Jesus' power.

Power for Jesus was servant leadership. Its peace in love for all people, rather than self-preservation. Its humility rather than self-aggrandizement. True power is self-sacrificing service for the well-being of others.

When we fear, we build walls for protection. Consequently, we close ourselves in. When we love, we open ourselves. We become vulnerable and place our trust in God. Though we believe that by walling ourselves in we have certainty, it's an illusion (the pandemic has made that all too clear). When we open ourselves, we have a chance to experience something new. Our vulnerability opens us to the movement and power of the Holy Spirit. Walling ourselves in makes our world small, possibly being only as big as ourselves. When we open ourselves to be vulnerable, we invite other people to join us, thus enlarging our world.

Herod used his power to build buildings and material things. Jesus used his power to build lives and bring true peace to all people. Fear motivated Herod. Love motivated Jesus. What motivates us and how we use our power seems obvious.

A common practice around New Year's is to make resolutions for the coming year. We typically do this to leave behind the parts of us that we're less than thrilled to keep. We also may want to adopt some new pattern for self-improvement.

As a congregation, what are our resolutions? How do we use our power? Realistically we may be limited in what we can do on a global scale. Locally, though, we can make a difference. Can we use our power to help people age appropriately here in Southampton? How much can we do and give to settle Afghan refugees? Can we use our power to help young people saddled with student debt? Can we begin to imagine how we can address affordable housing in this community?

Epiphany begins a season, which by the lectionary, reveals Jesus to the world. Christina Rossetti wrote:

Love Came Down at Christmas

Love came down at Christmas,
Love all lovely, love divine;
Love was born at Christmas,
Star and angels gave the sign.

Worship we the Godhead,
Love incarnate, love divine;
Worship we our Jesus:
But wherewith for sacred sign?

Love shall be our token,
Love shall be yours and love be mine,
Love to God and to all men,
Love for plea and gift and sign.

How do we reveal Jesus to this community? How can we incarnate Love here in Southampton in 2022?