

A Tale of Two Kings
Isaiah 9:2-7
Matthew 2:1-18

Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Isaiah 9:2-7

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined. You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

Matthew 2:1-18

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising and have come to pay him homage.' When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

"And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel." '

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.' When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

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.’ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, 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.’

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. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

‘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.’

Normally, we are in one Gospel all the way from Christmas to Easter. This year, that Gospel is Luke. We read the beautiful words at Christmas Eve that start with, “In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed.” We continued the story with Simeon and Anna, and with Jesus in the Temple. We will continue it next week, with Jesus’ baptism.

But this week has been eventful, and the Church exists in the real world. So we interrupt your regularly scheduled program. If you’re looking for someone to say things that are safely removed from the world you live in, then I’m going to disappoint you this morning, I’m afraid. I’m sure that you can find an obscure lecture on a University website somewhere.

This is important. This is life and death, and more important even than life and death. I really wish we were all together face to face. But ...this is the world we have right now.

On Wednesday, on the day that we Christians call Epiphany, our country and the world were shown some things, some ugly things. An elected leader called upon a mob to commit acts of violent insurrection, and they did. In an attempt to stop Congress from doing their Constitutionally mandated duty, they breached the United States Capitol Building for the first time since the British army burned it in 1814. These people took down the flag of the United States over the U.S. Capitol and raised the flag of their leader in its place. It is a miracle that only five people died.¹ All of this took place on live television, world-wide.

As John Pavlovitz said, "This was not Antifa. This was not Black Lives Matter. This was not the 'Radical Left' descending upon the Capitol to violently overturn a free and fair election by the people."² This was a mob of white domestic terrorists carrying Confederate flags and guns doing that. They had been told, and apparently believed, that they were entitled to take the law into their own hands when they didn't like how an election turned out. Perhaps worst of all, some of them even claimed to be doing all this in the name of Jesus and of a Christian nation.

Some people claim to be shocked that this could happen in America, and I'm sure that some people were genuinely completely surprised. But, frankly, certain others really sound like Captain Renault in the movie *Casablanca*, who exclaims

¹ News reports initially reported four dead; a Capitol police officer later died of his injuries, sustained at the hands of the insurrectionists.

² https://johnpavlovitz.com/2021/01/07/the-coup-we-saw-coming/?fbclid=IwAR1csMot3tXgnYXvIXH1geKABbEhHC776biup6_w56O1r71n_0X1HFvfbgk

that he is “shocked! Shocked to find that gambling is going on in here,” even as he has the croupier put his winnings in his car.³

The problem is that none of us should be surprised. We may like to look at this and say righteously, “This is not who we are,” but the truth is that this is who a part of America has always been. The America of “all men are created equal” and “liberty and justice for all,” has ALWAYS also been “...the America of slavery, the America of segregation, the America of Jim Crow, the America of the Ku Klux Klan.”⁴

This dark side has always been there – what happened this week and over the last few years is that some people’s eyes have been opened to it. That kind of revelation is called an epiphany.

That got me thinking about epiphanies and about Epiphany.

We celebrate Epiphany, or the Feast of the Magi, on January 6 every year, twelve days after Christmas. At Epiphany we celebrate the arrival of the Magi, the first revelation to Gentiles that God is doing something with Jesus.

As a Methodist named Robb McCoy pointed out, we call it the Feast of the Three Kings, but the truth is that the story is really about TWO kings. One King sat

³ *Casablanca* (1942).

⁴ Pavlovitz, *op.cit.*

on his throne, the one he'd been propped up in by a Superpower,⁵ and was terrified of losing his grip. He did whatever it took to keep his throne, including lies and shocking violence. Eventually he was so desperate to keep his position and his power that he put a hit out on a toddler.⁶

The other King was born to a poor family and laid in a manger. He and his family would soon be forced to be refugees in a foreign land because of the first king's insecurity. "Eventually he grew up to bring forth his Kingdom, which is one of healing, mercy, forgiveness, and justice. His power [is] in grace and love.

"Epiphany is not about three kings bringing gifts to Jesus. It is about TWO kings and our choice to follow ONE of them."⁷ As one of them said later, "You cannot serve two masters. You cannot serve both God and money."⁸

Epiphany is about the choices we make with our lives every day. It's about the big choices – what we do with our lives. But it's not just about the big choices. It's about everything we do, and everything we say, and how we treat everyone around us.

The choices represented by those two kings abide today. We still have to make the same choices.

The idolatrous god of violence tells his followers that physical, emotional, and social violence is the way to make things "right" again. He tells his followers that

⁵ Herod was not the best candidate for the Throne of David – he was chosen by Rome as being suitably compliant for their needs. In order to take the throne, he married into the royal family, marrying his brother's widow to do it in violation of Jewish Law.

⁶ Thank you, Nadia Bolz-Weber, for pointing this out in your characteristically blunt language.

⁷ Robb McCoy, Facebook post January 6, 2021, 3:40 pm. Emphasis added.

⁸ Matthew 6:24.

the worst thing they can be is weak. He tells his followers that they can treat anyone who disagrees with them however they like, because they themselves are always on “the right side.” Even this god’s followers can slip, though, and find themselves on the receiving end of violence through a word of mercy, a hint of empathy for someone who might be seen as weak.

This kind of violence never succeeds in creating the peace that its practitioners say they want. It is not capable of that.

The Prince of Peace observed that, “all who take the sword will perish by the sword,”⁹ and refused again and again to accomplish his mission by violence. He allowed human beings who disagreed with him to kill him in an unjust execution. He loved the people around him and treated them with dignity. He even forgave the people who were executing him.

God then raised him from the dead. Their violence was powerless to stop him. Their violence is powerless to stop him.

My siblings in Christ, the choice between the two kings is clear.

For our country and for ourselves.

Every day.

The Good News is that, in the end, victory goes to the Prince of Peace.

⁹ Matthew 26:52 (New Revised Standard Version).

I pray that we all make wise choices here about whom to follow.

Amen.