

Whose Side Are We On?

Matthew 2:1-12

Epiphany - Dec 31, 2017

Julius Caesar. I believe most of us have probably heard his name before, but are sketchy when it comes to the details of his life. In 46 BC, he was elected to be the first emperor to rule over the entire Roman Empire. Originally elected to one 10-year term, it was exactly one month before his death that his term of office was to be increased from a 10-year term to a lifetime appointment, like that of our Supreme Court judges in the United States today.

Julius Caesar's term of office was cut drastically short, however, when he died only two years into his term of service, not because he was mortally wounded in battle, or because of what some people call today "natural causes." Julius Caesar on the "Ides of March," on March 15th 46 BC was assassinated, which wouldn't be all that difficult to believe. Julius Caesar knew that he had made many enemies over the years. He knew that there were a lot of people who wanted him dead. THE STRANGE PART ABOUT JULIUS CAESAR'S ASSASSINATION IS THAT HE WAS KILLED BY A YOUNGER MAN, WHOM HE HAD TRUSTED AS ONE OF HIS CLOSEST ALLIES, A MAN WHOM JULIUS CAESAR HAD TREATED AS FAMILY, AS HIS VERY OWN SON.

DYING WORDS -- according to Shakespeare in Latin: "Et tu Brute?"

According to Suetonius were even more intimate, "You too, my child?"

On that day the Theatre in Pompey was turned into a place of violence and bloodshed, not unlike the way that the Ford Theater, Washington DC, was turned into a place of violence and bloodshed when President Abraham Lincoln was assassinated there.

In Julius Caesar's final words, he is expressing his belief that Brutus turned out to be a traitor. And there are many such cases of people becoming traitors!!!

WHAT STUDENT OF AMERICAN HISTORY CAN FORGET THE NAME OF BENEDICT ARNOLD. He was supposedly one of General Washington's most trusted allies during the Revolutionary War? He turned out to become a spy for the British Empire, sharing with the enemy some of the most highly-classified information possible. He even plotted to have George Washington assassinated at West Point, but the plan fell through! General Washington's life was preserved by the DIVINE PROVIDENCE OF GOD, SO THAT HE WENT ON TO BECOME OUR FIRST PRESIDENT AND LATER ATTRIBUTED TO BE THE FATHER OF OUR COUNTRY.

Of course, people who hold high political offices, or even those people who are hot shot celebrities in the entertainment industry need---protection, body guards and like!

And King Herod who is mentioned in our Gospel lesson today was probably in need of some protection himself given all the enemies that he too had made in his life!

But King Herod was, ruthless, cruel and wretched, in the way that he went about seeking his own sense of self-protection. If on his dying day he had even one ounce of a conscience left inside of himself, he would have had so many sins to confess before Almighty God. He may have confessed to God--that his number one motivation for doing so many of the things he did in life was that he was CONSTANTLY HAUNTED BY A SUSPICIOUS MINDSET.

- Shortly before his death, HE EXECUTED A NUMBER OF RABBIS AND THEIR STUDENTS, who had the wherewithal within them to take down THE ROMAN EAGLE THAT WAS THAT THE ROMANS HAD ATTACHED TO THE FRONT GATE OF THE TEMPLE.
- OR HE MAY HAVE THOUGHT ABOUT HIS OWN TWO SONS, WHOM HE HAD DROWNED TO DEATH IN A SWIMMING POOL AT THE HOME OF HIS NEXTDOOR NEIGHBOR.
- He could have lamented the execution of his favorite son, Antipater, who only days before Herod's death, had plotted to take his father's place.
- If Herod had even an ounce of conscience left within him, he could have repented of the 45 members of the Sanhedrin whom he had brutally murdered, along with hundreds of family members and palace staff--whom he had suspected of plotting against him.

My friends, when it comes to our ability to judge other peoples' character, were not really very good at that as human beings--and the Bible itself gives us two very pointed and poignant reasons why we are not!

JEREMIAH 17:9, "The human heart is the most deceitful of all things, and desperately wicked. Who really knows how bad it is?"

PROVERBS 14:12, "There is a way that seems right to a man, but the end thereof is always destruction.

SO YOU CAN IMAGINE HOW HEROD'S SENSE OF PARANOIA BECAME ALL THE MORE MAGNIFIED WHEN THE UNEXPECTED GIFT OF THESE WISE MEN RIDE INTO JERUSALEM WITH THE MOST AMAZING MESSAGE: *"Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose^[b] and have come to worship him."*

Matthew tells us that when Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him!

WHO WERE THESE WISE MEN ANYWAY? Men from Persia, men who were members of the Zoroastrian caste of priests! Highly learned, and one of their most prominent characteristics is that they were astrologers; in a day and in a culture when astrology was believed to be a very important scientific discipline.

We have all lived with lots of misconceptions about the Wise Men as people who are acculturated into the society in which we live today!

WISE MEN -- MAGI -- PLURAL FORM OF "MAGNUS," They were "THE GREAT ONES."

Not necessarily three of them...may have been 30 of them, or maybe even 300 of them.

We think three because of the three different types of gifts they brought along with them.

GOLD, FRANKINCENSE, AND MYRRH.

THEIR ENTRY INTO JERUSALEM MADE SUCH A SPLASH.

Would only the presence of three men do that?

Even if they were strange-looking characters? What if the people in Jerusalem had never encountered men of the Wise Men's ethnicity before this?

The whole city was in a state of consternation!

EVER BEEN PART OF A TOWN WHEN SUDDENLY THE WHOLE COMPLEXION OF THE CITY CHANGES. When I was growing up, it certainly was that way when another major NASCAR race was to be held at the Daytona Beach 500 Racetrack, like the FIRECRACKER 400 and others.

HARLEY-DAVIDSON SPONSORED THEIR ANNUAL BIKE WEEK.

The hymnwriter addresses all of this so beautifully though, doesn't he?

*The star proclaims the king is here; but, Herod, why this senseless fear?
For he who offers heavenly birth, seeks not the kingdoms of the earth!*

Well if King Herod had ever done anything right, he knew that the answer to the Wise Men's questions, would most likely be found in the Holy Scriptures, which indeed it was -- In Micah 5:2.

⁶ *“And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.”*

⁷ *Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. ⁸ And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.”⁹ After listening to the king, they went on their way.*

And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. ¹¹ And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.

¹² *And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.*

BROTHERS AND SISTERS AS TEMPTING AS IT MIGHT BE FOR US TO SPEND ALL OF OUR TIME TALKING ABOUT KING HEROD, OR EVEN ABOUT THE WISE MEN, OR THE REACTION OF THE RESIDENTS OF JERUSALEM, OUR NUMBER ONE FOCUS NEEDS TO BE THE VERY SAME EXACT FOCUS THAT THE WISE MEN HAD--TO BE ON THE CHILD--PROMISED LONG AGO TO THE PATRIARCHS AND THROUGH THE PROPHETS

Jesus, the Holy Son of God, now in human form would live in relative seclusion for the first 30 years of his life, but when the proper time came, he was led down there to the Jordan River where he was also baptized by John the Baptist. After he was baptized, he was led out into the wilderness where he was tempted by Satan for 40 days and 40 nights, but emerged from that heated contest victorious.

God had come into the world to be on our side, in facing up to our three greatest enemies for us--on our behalf--sin, death and the power of the evil one. "If God be for us, who can be against us? For he who spared not his Son but gave him up for us all, how shall he not then together with Christ give us all good things!"

Jesus too was betrayed, Jesus too, from the mere perspective of human beings was assassinated too, though this wasn't really the case at all. He gave over himself completely into the hands of his betrayer; whose betrayal he even predicted ahead of time. "*He was put to death of our transgressions and raised again for our justification!*" (Romans 4:25).

JESUS ENTERED OUR WORLD TO ALIGN HIMSELF COMPLETELY WITH EVERY ONE OF US, AND JUST AS THE WHOLE LIVES OF THE WISE MEN WERE CHANGED FOR THE BETTER ONCE THEY SAW THE BABY JESUS WITH THEIR OWN EYES--OUR LIVES ARE CHANGED, WHEN WE SEE HIM FOR WHO HE REALLY IS TOO!

Are we on the side of Herod--living only in fear of our own demise--and as victims of this world's cruelty? Or are we living on the side of the Holy Son of God, who loved us and gave himself up for us all? Amen