

Feast of the Epiphany
January 6, 2021
The Rev. Scott Walters

I'm about to preach most of a sermon that—as you might expect—was written prior to this afternoon. Watching the unfolding of events in our nation's capitol, the vice president escorted to an undisclosed location, the halls of congress evacuated, broken windows at the capitol and all...I thought it might be a time to tear it up and pray for the best. Or just say nothing much at all.

But when we talked a few hours ago about how our liturgy tonight should respond in this moment, we added the Great Litany, which seemed to provide words of supplication and contrition, prayers for deliverance meant to ground us in the eternal mercy of God in an anxious moment. And I decided to leave most of the sermon intact, trusting that the wisdom and the rhythm of the liturgical year pulled something forth that might be of use. More use than hastily composed thoughts, I pray. And, hopefully, the fact that this sermon was not written for the day the electoral college's votes were to be certified, but for the ancient feast of the Epiphany will give us space to hear what that story might still speak to us across these centuries. I do believe it still speaks.

The sermon I wrote began with a Facebook memory. One of those suggestions the platform makes, encouraging you to repost something from a few years back. This one was a photo of a TSA warning near the belted maze at terminal C of LaGuardia Airport. The sign read, "Please be advised. Snow globes are not allowed through the security checkpoint." Below the announcement, the universal snow globe symbol — Who knew there was one? — was shown inside a red slashed-through circle to communicate this prohibition to the illiterate, and to emphasize it a second time to the rest of us: "Don't even think about bringing a snow globe onto this plane." So we didn't.

Of course, it was easy to imagine some poor tourist with a new snow globe he'd paid 28 bucks for at the Statue of Liberty gift shop. Chances are he wasn't a terrorist. Chances are he had no violent intentions at all for the souvenir, even though, now that TSA mentions it, a decent snow globe does have enough heft to do some damage, were it to fall into the wrong hand.

Most likely it was a gift. A gift for someone who knew the traveler had been away and would be pleased by his return. A snow globe, of course, is a fairly useless gift, except for the small pleasure of shaking it up and watching the tiny flakes float down on Lady Liberty. And for the much larger pleasure of knowing that someone picked it up, packed it in his bag, and brought it all the way back here to you. Just because.

Now, we're left to imagine, the gift sits in a locked airport closet with all the others, next to a pile of pocket knives and 4-ounce bottles of shampoo. And it's enough to make some of us wonder, Are there other gifts in our lives that get removed from circulation? Removed, to be more specific, by fear and what seems like a perfectly rational need for control?

If you were made to read the various commentaries on the readings for the Feast of the Epiphany you'd learn a bit about the possible symbolic meaning behind each of the gifts that were brought to Jesus. What won't be made much of at all is the plain fact *that* these gifts were gifts. Special not because of how rare or fancy they are. Special not even because they're things associated with kings

or burials or anything else the interpreters tell us. They're special first in the way a snow globe from Ellis Island can be special: just because they're given away, with nothing expected in return.

I really don't mean to put TSA on the side of Herod in this sermon, but it's kind of happening. Herod isn't just an important historical character in the story of the nativity. He's a kind of foil. We know he's a king who is threatened by the arrival of another king, one who happens to be a helpless child just born to nearly helpless parents. A king whose army doesn't seem to be armed for battle at all. It just hovers in the sky above some shepherds, sings a few glorias, and then disappears. Jesus is the first anti-Herod of this story. These two kings are almost nothing alike, and we're meant to notice that.

But so are the wise men from the East. They are anti-Herods as well, aren't they? In fact, they may be dramatically unlike Herod in ways that are even more directly relevant to people like us living lives like ours, even today.

Interestingly, the difference between Herod and the magi isn't about what they believe. Herod's local religious experts agree with the wise men on the central details of the story. The Hebrew scriptures and apparently the texts or legends of those strange religions further off in the East were pointing to the very same child, an anointed one, this Jesus who's just been born in Bethlehem.

The difference, as we know, is in how people respond. The magi see the star and bring gifts. Herod gets the same news and decides that he'd better kill the child. Actually, it's worse than that. When the wise men slip through his grasp, Herod decides he'd better kill off everybody in the greater Bethlehem area under the age of two, just to be safe. So it's the gift givers verses the mass murderer now. Matthew is such a subtle storyteller.

But there are at least a couple of different ways we might explore the story from here. One is to name that power plus fear often equals death in this world. Children still die because powerful men see their power or their nation's power as something that must be preserved by force, as something that's always under threat, as a possession to be guarded fearfully from every enemy. And the way the Epiphany story kind of rhymes with Pharaoh's slaughter of the innocents at the birth of Moses extends this sad truth about our world way, way back in time as well.

Or we might use Herod's response as a metaphor for the damage each of us can do when we act out of fear and the desperate need for control in much smaller and more mundane ways. We're not bona fide bad guys like him. But even our fear can do more than a little damage to the people around us if we let it.

But a few chapters later in Matthew, when Jesus is grown up and teaching on a mountain, he says something startling. He says, "You know, maybe you haven't murdered anybody. You're no Herod or Pharaoh. But the truth is, you're not another order of being. If you've ever been angry, well, the same poison is alive in your heart that drives the killer." And when he says that, he holds together, in a very uncomfortable way, the violence that Herod's fear produces and the mundane failures of milquetoast sinners like you and me. We can live by Herod's values even if we have precious little in the way of power and influence in this world. Or, we can shape our lives according to the gospel. According to the logic of the gift.

This seems fairly relevant to a bunch of 21st century Christians who are saying their prayers together on the Feast of the Epiphany. It might even move a few Episcopalians in Memphis on a day like today to begin their Eucharist with the Great Litany. Because God knows that over the centuries the Church got pretty powerful, and far too often we behaved like Herod. Innocent people died when a fearful Church believed that the faith was a possession to be kept safe and protected and pure.

But let's face it. As 21st century mainline Protestant Christians, the headlines say that we're growing weaker by the year and are on our way to obsolescence. A story last fall in Episcopal News Service, which should be a sympathetic source, said that if current rates of decline continue, there will

be no Episcopalians at all in church on Sundays by the year 2050. Insult was added to this injury for us at Calvary when the stock photo ENS posted along with the original story was of Calvary's open red doors. I probably should have called to let them know we've actually been growing in numbers, but we had a pandemic to manage, you know.

The point is that even if we might have been 60 or 70 years ago, surely we're not the Herod in this story today. At our scariest we're more like a bunch of snow globe wielding terrorists. Kind of pathetic really.

But here's the thing. Anybody can get fearful and start acting like Herod. Anybody can live as though we need to take a frantic kind of violent control of our lives and our institutions if we're to survive. But if we're truly the Church of Jesus, we can't adopt the mindset of Herod. Which, among other things, probably means we won't save the Church by trying to save the Church. We can't be a religious TSA, exerting control over every detail we can, in what looks like a perfectly rational response to our fears.

What we need to be are more like magi if we're to be Jesus's Church. Spending our energy only on the act of giving our gifts away to one another, to our neighborhoods, to our cities, to the next stranger who stumbles in upon us. We're to be a community that's continually laying things at other people's feet and letting them go. Tending, most essentially, not to the things or the influence or the relevance or the membership rolls or the buildings that we possess.

In fact, you may have heard about congregations who got run out of their buildings and onto Facebook, of all places, by a virus. How scary is that, if we are what we possess?

But we're not, says the gospel. We're not what we possess, say the magi. We are bearers of gifts, every one of us. What we're called to tend to as the Church is the great exchange of whatever it is we've been given by God to give away.

Come to think of it, maybe what we're called to be really is a bunch of snow globe wielding terrorists, if you will. Maybe that's exactly how we're meant to move through the world. Maybe that's exactly how we're meant to challenge its violent order. By arming ourselves only with worthless things, by a violent world's estimation. Worthless things that begin to matter only as they are given away. Bread, water, wine. Kindness, welcome, forgiveness. Snow globes, some would say. Glistening and transformative gifts, says Jesus. Gifts that will only come to life, not as we defend them or hold them tight or store them up, but as we give them freely and entirely away.