

“The Boy Who Lived”
The Reverend Michael L. Delk
Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, Virginia
2nd Sunday after Christmas – 4 January 2009
Ephesians 1:3-6, 15-19a; Luke 2:13-15, 19-23

Herod was afraid, and not without good reason. Though his position was relatively secure, it was far from impregnable. There were the whispered rumors, which just happened to be true, that he wasn't quite Jewish enough to be King, having come as he did from Idumea. Plenty of rivals would have liked to see him go down. The zealots who accused him of collaborating with Rome wouldn't mourn his passing either. Any of one of them would have been more than happy to exploit the strange celestial sign that had brought the magi, to pluck from obscurity some unlikely whelp they could manipulate into an adversary, a front-man for a populist rebellion that would attempt to unseat Herod's bottom from his throne and his head from all the rest of him.

Something simply had to be done. You couldn't be careful enough in the high stakes game of palace intrigue and imperial politics. Based on the projections from his own court astrologers, along with the contribution of the strangers from the East, Herod knew that the special child he was after couldn't be more than two-years-old. Time to send out the hounds. What a wonderful luxury to have men on the payroll that wouldn't blush or blink to exterminate every boy under the age of two in an entire village.

Perhaps even as these vicious schemes were hatched in the mind of Herod, the dreams of Joseph were disturbed with vivid angelic warnings to take Jesus and Mary away to Egypt. There was more than a measure of irony to this instruction. Joseph's namesake, of Technicolor dream coat fame, was barely rescued from death when his eleven jealous brothers decided to turn a tidy profit on him instead, selling the Joseph of Genesis off to slave traders, who eventually off-

loaded Joseph in Egypt, where his family fled famine to join him and stayed for centuries, until a streak of bad Pharaohs came along, and it was time to leave.

Joseph might have wondered if the return trip for his family would take as long, or be quite as eventful, or maybe even bring to fruition a great promise of a better life. Off they went into the unknown, refugees cast out from all that was familiar to them by a violence born of lust for power; cast out to a strange place where they probably knew no one, nor did Mary and Joseph know whether it would ever be safe to come back home. Despite their incredible trust in God and the love they shared for each other that had brought them this far, Joseph and Mary must have been afraid, but since their fear was tempered by faith and love, Mary and Joseph could prevent their fear from turning them into monsters – an ability Herod would have envied, presuming he could have understood it.

You see, Herod was not necessarily a bad man, just a very successful one, by the standards which his world and ours measure such things. He built stuff – impressive and useful stuff, like ports and temples and cities and fortresses. He was wealthy beyond the dreams of avarice. Over his subjects, he bore the power of freedom – such as it was – or slavery; the power of life and death, and he bore it as well as anyone else burdened with such heavy responsibilities. Besides, people needed him. They might not think so, but they did. For many of his subjects, it was their only defense against their own worst selves. Order had to be preserved at all costs, and this baby born in Bethlehem was a tremendous threat to that fragile social order.

But they never found him, or maybe they did. How could they be sure, with the gutters running blood? It was a campaign of unparalleled brutality, not a surgical strike. In the midst of all that collateral damage, surely they'd gotten the one they needed to get. Having done what he could to preserve his prerogatives, Herod slept well for a few years until he went to sleep

permanently, making it safe enough for that little boy and his parents to come back home. Though for safety's sake, they settled down in the tiny hamlet of Nazareth, nestled in the picturesque if dirt poor Galilean hill country.

Of course, all of this is an awful way to begin the New Year, with ruminations on the urgent flight and furtive return of Jesus and his parents, not to mention the terrible slaughter of the innocents in Bethlehem, but it reflects the opening years of Jesus' life, and what we will be reminded of, again and again in the season of Epiphany that lie ahead, is that poor Herod did get one thing right: Jesus was trouble – for him and everyone like him. That's easy to forget in the wake of a Christmas at the manger and in the midst of our anxieties and resolutions for 2009.

And this story of Jesus' rough start also reflects contemporary reality more keenly than we might like. The tough neighborhood of Jesus hasn't changed much over the past two millennia. Yesterday, Israeli troops entered Gaza, after a week's worth of bombardment that killed several hundred people, many of whom were by all accounts innocent civilians, including some small children.

Now I can't blame the Israelis for wanting to defend their homeland. If Canada or Mexico lobbed rockets into Vermont or California every day for several years, we'd probably invade them, too, and I'd be all for it. Nor do I blame the pilots who dropped the bombs. No sane pilot wants to hit innocent civilians, though truth be told, no matter how fancy your five-hundred-pound bomb is, once you let it loose, what you want isn't really the issue anymore.

On the other side of the conflict, I can hardly blame the Palestinians either. For generations, they've been refugees, displaced from the property of their parents and grandparents, usually through no fault of their own, often on the basis of decisions made by foolish, greedy, bigoted people. Some may say that the Israelis, through their biblical covenant

with God, have an irrevocable right to all that land, regardless of who's been living on it for the past several hundred years. Problem is the Palestinians – both Christian and Muslim – have promises in their holy books, too, like the one we heard a few moments ago from the first chapter of Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, where he tells of we are adopted as heirs of the promise of Abraham through Jesus Christ.

Now the purpose of bringing up this incredibly controversial and deeply sad situation is not to tell you what to think, but to invite you to think. Some people say that preachers shouldn't talk about what's happening in the world. Pastors ought to focus on personal piety like no drinking, no cussing, no smoking, no dancing in the vertical position, and no dancing in the horizontal position, except in marriage. Pastors ought to leave all the rest of that business to those wiser in the ways of the world. People who say such things have either never read the words of Jesus, or they have read them and completely misunderstood them.

Jesus was political from the day he was born. That's why Herod wanted to kill him badly enough to eradicate every boy below the age of two in Bethlehem, and that's why three decades after Herod died, a group of equally fearful people with lots to lose convicted him of blasphemy and treason, and nailed him to a cross to die. So if you think politics doesn't belong in the pulpit, Christianity may not be the religion for you, because if the good news of Jesus Christ is to be preached here or anywhere, there can be no artificial limits assigned to its applicability.

So what are we meant to do? Pray for the peace of Jerusalem? Well, that's a start. But what we really need to do is to find out how the good news Jesus brought back then can be the good news Jesus brings now through us, and what we find out from today's story is that long before Jesus taught or performed his first miracle or infuriated his first opponent; in fact, before Jesus ever uttered a word or ate a piece of solid food or was potty-trained, he lived. It's like

Harry Potter. Jesus is the boy who lived! Sometimes, that's as good as the news gets, but that's good enough.

Jesus lived, not because of some accident or coincidence, but because God was faithful, and because Joseph and Mary were faithful to God and loved each other and they loved Jesus. Jesus lived, and by living, he teaches us how life often exiles us into strange places before we can return home, whether we're dealing with family dysfunction or drug addiction or career problems or collapsing stock portfolios or intellectual confusion or identity issues or God-forsaken wars halfway around the world.

And not only did Jesus live when Herod tried to kill him. Jesus lived when the Sanhedrin and Pontius Pilate teamed up to do the job. Jesus lived, despite the sins of the whole world, including ours, dumped upon him at Golgotha, and Jesus lives today: in us; in the bread and wine; in people and places we might never think to look.

Now I know that some of you may be thinking, "Give me a break. The fact that Jesus is alive doesn't fix anything. People are still dying over there." And I don't mean to oversimplify, which for those who know me realize is not in my nature; nor do I intend to demean in any way the unimaginable suffering so many face. But I do contend that if Jesus is not the answer, perhaps we are asking the wrong questions, and maybe a huge heap of super-stupid questions is why little children grow up and ostensibly mature into supposedly rational, well-intentioned adults who are nevertheless fixated on killing each other.

Maybe the really important questions aren't "What belongs to whom?" or even "Who belongs to whom?" Maybe the really important questions, the questions that actually help people stay alive, are questions like, "What does it mean to love my spouse and child?" or "How can I be faithful to God without harming others?" or "How can I keep my fear from turning me

into a monster?” or “What are the precise conditions that make killing another human being an acceptable action in the eyes of God?”

But too frequently, we haven't any time for those questions, or we answer them in perfunctory ways that seem most satisfying and convenient at the moment, because we're just too worried about preserving our honor or feeling safe or looking cool or getting our land back or exercising our hatreds before they consume us. But at the end of day, if we want to live – if we want to live with God's peace in our hearts -- we need to dwell on those questions, ever mindful of the refrain from that great hymn: “Because he lives, I can face tomorrow, because he lives, all fear is gone, because I know he holds the future, and life is worth the living just because he lives.” Amen.