

Sermon at St. Thomas by Lynn Cunningham. January 6, 2008. Epiphany Isaiah 60:1-9; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12.

1. Epiphany Sunday, coming at the end of the traditional twelve days of Christmas, celebrates the manifestation of the Christ to the Gentiles, the people who were not part of the Jewish tradition, including us here,.
2. All three lessons express the good news that God has brought salvation to all peoples, including those outside the Jewish tradition.
3. What is this good news? The good news at its heart reveals God's deep and abiding love calling out to each person here.
4. The Gospel story shows this love of God drawing people to God. The story centers on three sets of characters. King Herod and his advisors, the three Wise Men, and Mary and the Child.
5. The love of God draws people because the reality is that all human beings were created by God; all human beings are on a journey back to God; yet, everyone along the way of the journey back to God gets pulled aside from time to time by fears and by things that offer a sense of security that is false compared to the only true security, which is a person's return to God.
6. Paul's letter to the Ephesians in the chapter preceding what we just heard today, uses the image of God bringing peace to both Jews and Gentiles. He uses the image of building up all nations into one single household of God in the Holy Spirit. For Paul, God's love can be seen as a secure and holy dwelling place, a dwelling place where every person can be a member of the household of God. Every person's life can be seen as a journey back to rejoining this household of God.
7. The Gospel story lets the reader observe how various people fare on their journey to God, and what happens when a person or a community allows their fears to drive them into some false kind of security, some way of handling fears and doubts that stop them from being able to join the household of God.
8. The main event in the Gospel passage witnesses three wise men traveling to Bethlehem to worship the Christ child. It is easy to see them as being on a journey back to the God who originally created them. Where the wise men come from, the Gospel does not say. Maybe the three wise men are like you and me, seeking the child, asking, where is the special child, seeking to return to the holy.
9. The wise men stop in Jerusalem, and visit the King, Herod, before going on to Bethlehem. Perhaps for you and me, too, finding our way to the Christ child, to the holy, means exploring and stopping off at all those places that the world has to offer in the way of attractions and distractions before we can understand what it means to move on to become finally a part of the household of God, to return to God's love.
10. Herod turns out not to be the king that the wise men were seeking, even though in terms of the everyday world, he was literally the king of the Jews, and of Israel.
11. Focus on Herod's situation. How had he turned away from seeking God in his life?
12. Herod holds the position of king, because he and his predecessor kings had been willing to cooperate with the Roman Empire, which had recently conquered and occupied Israel and Judea. He is a puppet ruler, since he can be removed at any time by the Roman governor of the province.
13. What kind of fears may have driven Herod to seek security in the power of his kingship, rather than in the household of God? Perhaps he was afraid because he could be removed if he did not keep the local population quiet and cooperative.
14. His kingship held no interest to the wise men, after they realized how he used his power. When you and I are seeking to come into that household of God's love, sometimes our efforts, too, lead down false paths, and we have to look elsewhere, just as the wise men did.
15. The birth of a child whom the people might recognize as the messiah by the Jews in

- Judea represented a direct threat to Herod's kingship, and to the Roman Empire. The child stood for a different ordering of society, a different kind of rule over the people, than a conventional king like Herod. The Christ child invited membership in the household of God, as Paul says, as opposed to citizenship in the domination system of the Herodian kingdom.
16. Herod's best strategy is to get this child out of the way quickly before the people could begin following him as someone who offers what God wanted for Israel.
 17. Look at the prophecy of Isaiah or the Psalm, 72, to find out what God has in store for the kings of the earth, including Herod. The prophesy calls for a kingdom of abundance and sharing for all. The prophesy shows what a household of God's love is like. The wise men were looking for this kind of king, who would always seek to be part of God's desire for loving abundance for all people, as found in Isaiah and Psalm 72,
 18. Matthew's Gospel says that Herod consulted learned religious people to find out more about the notion of who the messiah might be. Herod is clueless about the meaning of the ancient prophecies. All he can imagine is that the child will be another political competitor! Herod's fears have driven him to place his security in something less than in the hands of his own Creator. What Herod heard from the learned teaches was not encouraging for him and his position.
 19. Herod felt caught between his idea of a political messiah to liberate Judea, and the needs of the Roman empire to maintain its political and military control over the land and its people.
 20. Herod's predicament is an eye opener. Look what happens when a person stops seeking God in their life. Look what happens when a person settles for some form of security which is short of membership in the household of God.
 21. Herod felt caught in the middle of competing forces, and frightened.
 - a. Many people find themselves caught between opposing forces, and are not sure which way to go. Like Herod. The journey back to God is not an easy one in the face of distractions and pressures from everything around us.
 - b. Think of all the troubling issues floating around in our country, and in Dubois and sometimes in our own personal lives.
 - i. How to raise children in Dubois.
 - ii. How to age gracefully and vigorously, in Dubois. The list of potentially troubling issues is long.
 - iii. Issues such as these push and tug at a anyone who is seeking to find their way back to God, their way back to loving household of God.
 22. Look where Herod turned for security.
 23. He relied on his military power. Eventually he sends his soldiers to slaughter all children in Bethlehem of a certain age, in an effort to kill the Christ child before he could become a threat.
 24. Herod relied on his political position, as king, for security. But did this position make him secure?
 25. Herod relied on the strength of his family background. His father and other relatives had been kings before him and he inherited his position as king. What security did his family really offer?
 26. Herod could order people who disagreed with him or threatened him to be severely punished.
 27. Herod's sources of security are all things that most people can easily understand.
 - a. But did Herod find real security in all these things? No. He turned away from his journey to God by engaging in these things.
 28. By contrast Jesus, and Paul in Ephesians, and Isaiah, and the psalmist offer a dramatically different journey from the path followed by Herod.
 29. What kind of path were the three wise men following on their long and dangerous journey

- to the Christ child in Bethlehem?
30. You already know. Look in the Gospels. Jesus talked about commandments, but they are different commandments than what a king such as Herod issued.
 - a. How does Jesus respond when people did bad things? Does he order them killed? No. He says, Turn the other cheek. Love your neighbor. In fact, love your enemies. Forgive seventy times seventy times. If someone asks for your shirt, give him your coat as well. Jesus invites people into a very different kind of household than the citizenship in Herod's kingdom.
 - b. Does Jesus brag about his biological family? No. We see him actually denying his own family at one point. And then he says that whoever comes and follows him, is his mother, his brother, his sister. Jesus's household members are those who love one another and who love God.
 - c. Jesus shows how avoid being diverted from a person's journey back to God by family issues.
 - d. Jesus' teaching stands the world of Herod the king completely on its head.
 31. Paul in the letter to the Ephesians, and the Isaiah passage, and psalm 72 all invite us on a journey to join a household of all peoples, peoples rooted and grounded in God's love for God's creatures. Herod followed a detour.
 32. Epiphany is sometimes said to be the season of light overcoming the darkness of the world. Let Herod's mad diversion from his journey to God illustrate the darkness for you to avoid.
 33. And let the choices made by those three wise men illumine your own choices along your journey back to the God who created us all.
 34. In Jesus' name, Amen.