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Title: Christmas Danger

Preaching: Randy Spleth, Senior Minister

Text: [Matthew 2:1-16](#)

E-mail: [Randy Spleth](#)

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I am ahead of the story but there is a need. It is hard enough getting people to church on Sunday during a pandemic. To get you to worship on this coming Wednesday didn't seem likely to happen. Wednesday is January 6th and on that day, the church season called Epiphany begins. For those of you who are counting, it is 13 days

after Christmas. The 12 days of Christmas will be over. That makes today the 10th day of Christmas although I don't see any "Lords a-leaping" around here.

I'm preaching on Epiphany even though we are still officially in the season of Christmas. Epiphany is a marvelous season when we hear those wonderful passages that reveal the divinity of Jesus when the heavens open and God claims Jesus as his beloved Son. This is my son, my boy, sent because of my love for you. But that is getting even further ahead. On the first day of Epiphany, January 6th, we finish Christmas.

We do too. Epiphany is when we put away all our nativities. Many of you know this is no small feat as Ann collects them. I always think it can be accomplished in a shorter time than it takes. But the number of nativities which we display is not small. This year's count is 89, four new ones having been added in 2020. It is a marvelous collection. Many are from around the world: places we've traveled. Some are gifts we have received, some even from you. Most are small; they could be described as miniatures. Only a few are large enough to take up several board feet. And only twelve, a mere 15% are Matthean. Just twelve have the Epiphany visitors of wise men.

I'll be honest. I haven't thought much about it until this year. But it struck me, as I was putting this sermon together, that 85% of the crèches that we display with pride are Lukan. A number is just the holy family: Joseph, Mary, and baby Jesus. A few are even less than that, a Madonna and child. More than half include shepherds, animals, and angels. But few have wise men

I've tried to figure out why this is. I suppose it could be practical. Magi do take up space, with their gifts and camels. For the most part, it is our bigger crèches that have Epiphany visitors. But there are a couple of tiny miniatures that have them carefully carved in the scene. So I guess the space reason doesn't hold up.

I suppose it could be due to a disagreement over their number. We assume there were three kings because three gifts are presented to Jesus. But the number isn't taken for granted. First-century depictions like the wall painting in the Roman catacomb of Domitilla shows four magi; a later catacomb of Peter and Marcellinus depicts two. Three wise men don't show up in art until the 3rd century, likely because it was then that the early church father Origen suggested it. A variety of early second century Syrian documents name twelve.¹ I wouldn't want a nativity in our house with 12 wise men and their camels. You have to draw a line somewhere. Still, the number hasn't bothered some in the past so why so few now?

It might be financial. I don't mean to suggest more pieces cost more. Rather, perhaps it is tied up with the whole economics of Christmas. We like to tell the story of a poor couple bedding down in a stable in Bethlehem, to see Jesus lying in a meager estate. To have royal visitors bear expensive gifts in a house where the family is staying somehow changes the picture, more suburban than urban. It's just a thought.

I have one more though, new this year. Let me try it out on you. For all of the devotion that these seekers from the east represent, their actions reveal that Christmas has enemies. They kicked over a terrible can of evil which would eventually lead to the death of Jesus. It's a hard thing to look at and the wise men remind us of this truth. Christmas has enemies; Christmas isn't just calm and bright. There is danger there.

It started because they show up at the wrong place, the unintended consequences of being navigationally challenged. They go to Jerusalem and ask to see King Herod. Then they ask, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?" (Matthew 2:2) We want to bow down and worship him. It seems like such an innocent question and a genuine request. It's hard to believe that it put in motion such terrible, awful things. Well, perhaps not so hard to believe. You do not ask a king, "Where's the king?" What were they thinking? We call these men wise?

Herod was intimidated and frightened and all Jerusalem with him. He called in the doctors of law and Scripture. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet." Micah. Herod meets secretly with the magi, however many there were and lies. That's what enemies do.

Truth doesn't mean anything whatsoever. Herod pretends to want to worship him. "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" (Matthew 2:8b) Off they go and unwittingly being used by the enemy of Christmas. They had no idea of the danger they were creating until they were warned.

They found Mary and Jesus in a house and presented their gifts. They bowed down, almost as if they knew the hymn that Paul would later pen, "...that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth." (Philippians 2:10) But not every knee would bow. Not Herod's. "They were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road." (Matthew 2:12)

And Joseph was warned, too. That night, after they had left, Joseph had a dream. One of those that make you sit up fast.

"Mary, Mary, get ready; wrap the child."

"What's the matter?"

We've got to go."

"What do you mean?"

"I had this dream. They're coming for the boy. They're coming, yeah, they're coming for the boy. Get ready. We've got to go."

And the Holy Family is barely out of Bethlehem when they come, death warrants in handwritten by Herod himself. A house-to-house search, and the butt of swords crashing down doors. Chariots on the streets, and mothers desperately clutching babies.

It's hard to believe. It's hard to accept that this is a Christmas story, that Christmas has enemies, that there is Christmas danger. But it is there. Why? Why else than Jesus is born? The coming of Jesus Christ and the proclamation of the Good News has aroused the ugliness of sin and violence in the world. Ask the crying women lined up in Bethlehem "...wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; refusing to be consoled, because they are no more." (Matthew 2:18). They know first-hand Christmas danger.

Such a story! Why come and ruin our lovely 12 days of Christmas? What up with this? Matthew's point is clear: there are two kings and two kingdoms, one of violence, one of peace, one of hatred, the other of love. Violence has its sword drawn against peace, hatred has mounted fury against love. It's always that way. It is the way evil is released; it's how you call up the forces of hell that come to wreak violence against the earth, the way hatred gets stirred up. Start loving everybody, and the Enemy can't stand it. Do

you know how to strengthen and increase the network of lies and deception in our world? Just tell the truth. That's all it takes.²

Not this time. At every turn, Herod's attempt to destroy Jesus is thwarted by the will of God to be with us, to reveal His love for us, to bring peace. Joseph, faithful again, takes the Prince of Peace off to hide from the king of violence. Unfortunately, the death of Herod does not end the chase. After Herod comes Herod Archelaus, after Herod Archelaus comes another Herod, and another and another.³ It doesn't stop, the contest between these two kingdoms. If you think it does, you haven't been looking around. We witness the love of God come to earth on Christmas, the Prince of Peace offered that there might be goodwill for all. But around us, there is violence and murder, fear and mistrust, anger, and hatred.

Dare we ask, "Which king are we bowing down to?" The king of peace or the king of violence? Love or hate?

Don't be defensive. Sometimes, it's hard to know just what your actions are supporting. Look at the wise men again. They didn't want to encourage violence. All the wise men said is, "Where is he?" They wanted to have a little worship service and trouble broke out. Without thinking it through they served an evil king. Sometimes, it is hard to recognize just what the Herods of the world stand for.

I think that's the point of this story about Christmas danger. All of us are just like the wise men. We want to love Jesus, to bow down and worship him as our king. But sometimes getting there, we get lost and without knowing it, serve another. I know I do, even if I don't like being reminded of it. Maybe it's a good thing that we don't have many wise men in our crèche collection.

Here's another good thing, our Epiphany message in advance of the day. God so loved the world that He gave his only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life. "Go and search diligently for the child." (Matthew 2:8b) but be careful who you talk to along the way.

¹Jensen, Robin. Witnessing the Divine. The Magi in Art and Literature. Bible Review 17:6, December 2001.

²Craddock, Fred. Wineskins. September – December 1994. The Hardside of Epiphany.

³Craddock, Fred. Christian Century. December 14, 2014. On the lectionary.