

## ***Christmas Day-After Message (St. Stephen's Day), 2021***

### ***Prayer:***

### ***Introduction:***

I've been thinking about what to say today for awhile now. This is partially because, of course, I said things about Christmas just a day ago, and really didn't want to repeat myself to those of us who came together for our Christmas Eve service.

But this is partially, too, because there are a thousand things to talk about when it comes to Jesus' birth. And we don't always get the chance to talk about it, you know? The day after Jesus was born. Our very Advent focus on Peace, Hope, Joy, and Love can cause us to miss the story, a bit. And, of course, it's my last Sunday as our Pastor. No small thing.

I want to talk about the Christmas Story as Matthew puts it, as it was read to us. I'm going to move fast, and I'm going to make one big, broad point: The status quo cannot save us. Maintaining what we've got cannot give us freedom. It is only in a reflexive, honest responsiveness to God--a commitment to be flexible and obedient to God's leading, as God reveals it to us--is there any hope of any of the Advent things that we've been talking about: Peace, Love, Hope, or Joy.

I'll make this point. That's it. And I'll of course connect it to this moment in our shared life, too.

### ***Players:***

Let's talk about what we see in the Christmas Story as Matthew puts it. Who are the players?

***Players: "Three Wise Men"***

There are the wise men, three eastern astrologers, or "magi"--magicians--as some of our bibles say. Or Kings, if we're really kicking it old style with our translations. They were ancient Persian religious experts. We say there are three, because they've got three gifts. But some swaths of Christendom assume twelve came.

They're excited. They've been traveling months and months, from foreign lands, based on the revelation of Jesus' birth by creation itself--a star in the sky that's stayed stable, directing their journey--and they arrive in Jerusalem all expectant, ready to give honor to this infant because of who this child is and what he'll do: They've got royal gifts, royal credentials, they're the first Gentiles ready to worship, kneel down, to Jesus. (And of course, in case we've been misguided a little by our nativity sets, these guys weren't present the morning after Jesus' birth, you know, but later, when he's a toddler...two, some will say.)

They go to the palace and they don't find the infant king they're looking for, but someone else. He hosts them at the palace for a few days, learns how long ago this star rose in the sky, this baby was born, and sends them to find the child, then report back to him so that he can join them in honoring the little one. It's something they're willing to do until, warned in a dream, they realize Herod's trickery and side-step Jerusalem on their way home, having honored the infant Jesus the way they always intended to.

***Players: "King Herod...and all Jerusalem with him..."***

And the someone else these star-gazing wise men find when they arrive at the palace in Jerusalem is King Herod. You don't need to know much about him except that his rule is barely legitimate, and any power he has in Judea comes from his ability to turn marshal up Rome's occupying soldiers to enforce his will.

His response to these wise men showing up is to be afraid. This makes sense. He takes their revelation as a sign that a legitimate ruler has arrived. He sees this for what it is, which is a threat to his rule, his power, which if he plays it right could go on for a really long time, maybe even down his family tree.

But Matthew also tells us that "all Jerusalem" is frightened alongside Herod. And my best guess here is not that, you know, the poorest of the poor are frightened--they aren't in Jerusalem anyway, right? They're shepherds in fields, who go to Jerusalem and the Temple for high holy days, but that's it. Jerusalem was the center of power in the Jewish world, and I think what Matthew is telling us is that those in power in Jerusalem--the rich, the influential, the king-like, Herod's colleagues and all those whose power and influence came from knowing the most powerful and influential guy--King Herod. These are the frightened ones.

And they should be frightened. If there's a legitimate king, and these gentiles from the opposite side of the world from Rome know about him, then their days are numbered.

But Herod responds reasonably, if you think about it from his perspective. He calls some religious smarties together, finds out where this Messiah was supposed to be born, uses the Magi and their excitement as pawns in his game to

destroy the threat against him. They of course, as we heard, don't play by Herod's rules.

So Herod did what also makes sense, if what makes sense is protecting his power: He kills every child who was two or under in and around Bethlehem. You can't let the Messiah live, you know? He'll ruin everything. Herod and "all Jerusalem with him" are invested in maintaining what they've got set up, even if maintaining it means the murder of dozens of innocent toddlers in a world where childhood is already dangerous enough.

Of course, we're meant to notice in this just how un-king-like Herod is, right? He is the bad guy; and Joseph is warned in a dream to stay away from even Herod's son, who took Herod's throne after he died, and seems to be cut from the same family cloth.

### ***Players: "Holy Family"***

There's the Holy Family. Joseph, Mary, Jesus. Of these three, it's Joseph who has a real role, as far as Matthew presents it. He's the one who dreams dreams, receives messages from God through Angels about where to go and what to do, and obeys.

Mary's role in Matthew's account is thin, frankly: It's simply to be a virgin, bear and deliver a child. Matthew skips so much of what Luke dwells upon--rich, wonderful things, where Mary glorifies God, consents to bear the Messiah, engages with family around this miracle and the miracles they share, too.

But in Matthew, Joseph is the actor in these scenes. Mary gives birth to and cares for Jesus. And of course, Jesus is the

one around whom everything takes place. Jesus is the center: the focus of the wise men's joy, the focus of Herod's rage and wrath, the reason his parents move from here to there to here to there. He doesn't do much, except exist, and in being born, toddling around, he becomes the center of this huge drama.

Jesus is born: "Immanual"; God with us. The hopes and fears of all the years--hopes that the Messiah would come, that God would be with his people. Fears that when God shows up, those who have acted against him would be shown the door, or worse: receive in kind what they've doled out so freely.

### ***Players: Others***

There are others, of course. The angels, bearers of God's messages in a number of dreams. God stands behind them, keeping Joseph and Mary and Jesus and the Wise Men safe. There are the murdered children who've done nothing wrong, who were simply born in a particular time and place; their parents, who end up fulfilling a terrible prophecy of unconsolable grief. Herod's son. The religious intelligentsia.

### ***Two Sides:***

But there really are two sides to this true story.

On the one hand, there's Jesus' family, obeying God and going here and there. On the other hand, there's Herod and "all Jerusalem," the ones who respond to the news about the Messiah's birth not with joy, or obedient flexibility, but with fear and control and force.

Or we could say, there are two responses, maybe, that we see: A response for God that some of these people had--

modeled--and a response against him. And while I know what we want as Christians is to be on the side of the good guys in this true story, everything about this world we live in tempts us to act like Herod and all Jerusalem, with fear and all of fear's weak, faithless responses.

Our great temptation in this life is to mimic Herod and all Jerusalem, and to do this in one way in particular, which is to protect the status quo when it's good for us. Our temptation is to protect the status quo whenever we realize how good it is for us.

### ***Protecting the Status Quo:***

Our constant temptation is for our security to come from the status quo, from a belief that if "what is" simply stays as "what is" forever, if things only stay this way forever, then we'll be fine. The world will be fine. If at any point things seem okay for us--stable, free, comfortable--we'll do anything we can to keep them that way.

This is Herod. This is, as Matthew puts it, "all Jerusalem," the entire city--or at least, the movers and shakers there, who benefit from Herod's power, benefit from things staying "as they are." Herod has a pretty good gig, you know? He's all powerful in a tiny little sphere, he's a person of influence, he's wealthy beyond, say, what Joseph or Mary could ever imagine. He's blessed.

(Except that he's not blessed at all; he's the opposite of blessed, in that the fine situation he is in depends not on the action and grace of God but on his own efforts to keep it from ever changing. We are either blessed or grasping in this world, not both.)

For Herod and everyone scrounging the scraps of his power and influence for their own good, their own interests, their wealth and paper crowns, it is critical that things do not change. It is critical that things stay the way they are--if they change, you lose it all, and all those great expectations about the future and how good it will be just disappear like smoke in a strong wind. They've put their security in the status quo. Herod and "all Jerusalem," should be afraid, it makes sense for them to be afraid. Hope, Peace, Love, Joy--or whatever jerry-rigged versions of them they've been able to cobble together--these don't come from God, they come from the great lie that if only things can stay the way they are right now, everything will be good. Everyone is vested in Herod keeping power, because Herod's power ensures their own good situation.

And we can say "Oh, it's so unreasonable! What faithlessness! You Dopes, God's shown up!" But we people are constantly tempted to use everything in our power to ensure that if we are in a comfortable position---and we almost always think when things are good for us it is because we deserve it, which causes its own problems--then we'll act just like Herod and his ilk: in fearful protection of the status quo.

And so of course when Herod and his ilk hear from these excited, joyful, pagan magicians the good news that the Messiah has been born, they flip out. It is a threat to the security of Herod's kingship, which at best should be a placeholder for the Messiah, and at worst is utterly illegitimate, and it's a threat to whatever security "all Jerusalem" has placed in the status quo of Herod's rule.

And they aren't crazy. This is important. Their response

makes sense given their situation. Things will be okay for Herod's cabal only if things do stay the way they are. They should respond in fear. This makes sense. On some deep level, I hope we get this. I hope we identify with them, frankly. I hope we can remember the times in our lives where what we really have wanted is just for nothing to change, because we can handle this moment, at least.

For most of us, the status quo is better than the alternative, because at least we know what to expect, and for some of us the status quo is in every way a benefit: We have power and influence in at least some sphere, wealth in some way, and as long as things don't change, we assume we'll, at least, be fine.

### ***A Christmas Challenge:***

And that's the rub. Because of course, while the status quo may be good for Herod and "all Jerusalem," it wasn't good for a lot of people. It wasn't good for most people. And what Herod and "all Jerusalem" don't understand, a thing that the other side in this story get, see, is that God is simply not interested in keeping the status quo. He's just not interested in it. The agenda of God--surprise--doesn't always line up with ours, especially when ours is driven by our interest in our own good.

The Christmas Story, as Matthew puts it, challenges us to ask ourselves if our trust and security come from the status quo, from our ability to muscle down and control what we have control over, because it's good for us or because it is at least known, or if our trust and security--if our Hope, Peace, Love, and Joy--come from joining in the new things that God is doing all the time.



### ***The Brighter Side:***

This is what the other side of the story, the shining, bright side of the story, knows. What the Wise Men, Joseph and Mary, know. They reveal to us that if we can live a life of flexible trust in God, we can be a part of world-changing, all-creation changing, miracles.

### ***Our Status-Quo:***

And, look, Smoky Row: The status quo, it is a-changin'.

Our status quo is changing. Your status quo is changing.

I'm almost finished as our Senior Pastor. My time doing what I can to guide us, advocate for us, pastor us--it's nearly finished. Whatever is next is not what's now.

And, sure: It's changed so much over the past 20 months. But we've gotten kind of used to those changes, even if we don't love them, right? Even if we wish COVID weren't around and we could all just be together the way we want to be together--freely, without concern, in fellowship—we still, at least, know what to expect right now.

And I've been around, even if we haven't been together. There's stability in that: We've known that Rich was still our pastor, and that there were things happening, and we figured they were being managed okay, because we'd had just enough time with me to trust our relationship, you know? We've had, even during COVID, all the things that make us feel like organizationally, congregationally, we're still approximating normal, just waiting, for a time.

And I need to remind us that our normal is changing. It's a no-fun-but-critical part of the role that I still have among us.

Even this weird normal of COVID that we've not necessarily enjoyed, even it is going away.

Oh, all the good things will remain, will more than remain. I deeply, deeply believe what I shared back in September: That it's actually for Smoky Row's good that I go. I do think your future is brighter than our recent past, and in the same way as there was continuity between Jesus' body before his resurrection and after it, there'll be similarity between Smoky Row as we have been, are, and Smoky Row as you will be. But there will also be newness, just as Jesus' resurrection body was new in a way that the Bible never really describes.

And, you know, I empathize in a way I haven't before with Jesus, when he says, "I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear." I empathize with Paul, but don't have Paul's great confidence to say, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." And I'm not dying, you know...but the way in which we engage together will die soon; that season will end.

See, if my leaving is anything, at its most basic it is a change in the status quo of things.

And again: The Christmas Story asks us if our trust and security come from the status quo, from our ability to muscle down and control what we have control over, because it's good for us or because it is at least known, or if our trust and security--if our Hope, Peace, Love, and Joy--come from joining in the new things that God is doing all the time.

***New Things To Come:***

God is doing a new thing in the life of Smoky Row and our status quo is ending. Will Smoky Row's trust and security--it's hope, peace, love and joy--come from leaning into the unknown future, leaning on the God who directs it, or will it come at all?

Because the truth is that there is no other place for it when the status quo ends, right? That's what the Christmas Story really reveals. Herod, "all Jerusalem," they sought to cling to what they could, and they used all their power to keep the world as it was, but the world changed despite their efforts. Christ was born and Immanuel, it turned out, couldn't be unmade; only their faithlessness could. The future arrives, and the status quo changes, regardless of our desires.

Our only choice is to move forward or stall out; to thrive or to pass away into a bad example, one more inflexible warning, longing for something that's no longer real.

***Charge:***

If I have a charge to give us, it's this: Be prayerful, be open to hearing from God. Receive the opportunities that God will offer to you as gifts. Don't seek to protect your own interests, but God's. Be nimble and quick in your faithful responses, and rely on each other.

Treat what's to come like Christmas: Be like the Wise Men who hustled when God revealed to them where to Go. Be like Mary who said yes to God's declaration of her chosenness, and responded with praise. Be like Joseph, who learned news and tried to do the best he could, and when God interrupted his best, he trusted God for something better. Be like Simeon, prepared to respond when God

spoke, like Anna, who made a spectacle when a spectacle was called for. Be like every good, responsive example.

The future holds goodness for Smoky Row Brethren Church. You will be led into peace you embody; hope that will sustain; contagious joy; and continued love. I'm sure of it. If you have felt love for me and want to honor me, then, look: Embrace what's to come for God's sake, even as you celebrate, with fear and trembling, what God has accomplished through us in our years together.

***Honored:***

I have been so honored to share in the honor God has given you in the recent years. I have been blessed to learn from your obedience, and seek to model it myself. I've been gifted by your gifts. Keep on gifting and modeling and teaching.

However you discover what it is God asks of you in the days to come, whether through Scripture, through shared prayer and counsel, or even through angels and dreams, I pray that you can embrace it with the same promptness, faithfulness, and joy that the brighter side of the Christmas Story reveals to us. I trust you will.