

First Sunday of Christmas
December 30, 2007

Pastor Mae Jean Zelle
Emanuel Lutheran Church (ELCA), Dallas, Texas, USA

Scriptures: Isaiah 63:7-9, Psalm 148, Hebrews 2:10-18, Matthew 2:13-23

This year, we have an anomaly. First of all, we have started the Year A cycle of readings, and so we are reading the Gospel lessons from Matthew, which gives us the account the Holy Family's flight to Egypt and of Herod's slaughter of the Innocents. And second of all, January 6th, Epiphany, falls on a Sunday so we will be reading the story of the visit of the Magi next week. This is exactly out of order from how it happened at the time. But we'll go with the texts as they are appointed. Just thought I would explain.

It does seem wrong somehow to have to deal with the tragic nature of this story right after all the happy feelings generated by the contemplation of the warm glow of the stable manger where the newborn baby Jesus lay. We celebrated the new of the gift of a Savior. Everything is shiny and bright. And then this. The sound of Rachel weeping for her children. It calls to mind all the Rachels who weep for children. All the violence that robs people of loved ones, young and old. It doesn't matter whether that cause is right or not. The heart breaks for those whose loved ones are killed in acts of violence, military, political, and otherwise. Our world has seen no less weeping than in days of old. One wonders whether we will ever learn another way.

But it was the Gospel writer Luke who gave us the account of the stable and the angels. Matthew gives us the story of the Magi, the angel warning Joseph to flee, Herod becoming infuriated, and the soldiers slaughtering the infants and toddlers of Bethlehem. Matthew was keeping it real. Herod was ruthless. Herod held power in the land of Judah as an agent of the Roman Empire. In some ways, it's a little ironic that someone so supposedly powerful should be threatened by a little baby. But he was not about to let his power be compromised. It was so much easier to strike early and hard.

In this short little account Matthew sums up in a way we often overlook what people's lives were like in those days, in the days of the so-called Pax Romana, the Peace of Rome. Matthew illustrates clearly and poignantly, the nature of the power of Rome, and the cost of living under that rule. It was all based on fear, the fear of violence. Most people would quietly go along with all manner of oppression and exploitation; heavy taxes, their sons taken into the army, their daughters taken as slaves or concubines. Because if you resisted, you would be met with swift, ruthless, violent suppression. Better to make the best of a bad situation. Keep your head down, avoid being noticed, and hope you could raise your family and do your business without any run-ins with the authorities. That's what life in the Roman Empire was like. Most people lived quietly. Except for when someone powerful was upset. Then the Rachels of the world wept.

There has been a trend lately, among the biblical and theological scholars. They have been taking a look at the theme of Empire, in the Bible in general and in the Gospels and

Jesus' life in specific. We had one such scholar here earlier this fall. Jorg Reiger from Perkins at SMU was here giving a talk. He has recently written a book called, "Christ and Empire." A fellow by the name of John Dominic Crossan, also at SMU, has been doing work in a similar vein. In a recent interview he said something to the effect that God has been against empires since day one. God sent Moses to free the children of Israel from slavery in the first empire, the Egyptian empire under Pharaoh. Jesus then, came to announce God's alternative to all the empires of the world – the Kingdom of God. Jesus was to be a King, but not of an earthly kingdom, rather of a heavenly kingdom, God's kingdom.

Well, I haven't read the books either of these gentleman have written, but just from the surface of it, one can say that all earthly empires have a few things in common. And all of those things are different from what God's Kingdom is about. For starters: all empires are built by humans, by human endeavors. Leaders who get a thing started, sometimes even for pretty good reasons, with pretty altruistic goals. But power is accumulated. Most empires built stuff: roads, armies, ships, communication systems. All things that can be used to serve two main endeavors: military strength and commerce. The technologies change, but the pattern is the same. And the strength just concentrates in the hands of a few.

That leads to the second thing all empires have in common, they are ultimately run by fear. They get to a place where they can tell other peoples, other countries, "play by our rules economically, or else." That's what the taxation in Jesus' day was all about. And the "or else" was that soldiers could come and take what was theirs. Tax-collectors could extort whatever they felt they could get away with. Empires carry a big stick, a strong military that can force the issue if peoples or countries don't go along willingly. There is always the 'or else.' Fear, and other negative emotions like resentment, and eventually hatred, are the constant undertone of life and relationships.

And finally, the third thing all empires have in common is that they eventually fall. One after the other, every empire in history has fallen apart sooner or later. That's because they are built by humans, they are built on human ideas about power. Humans are sinful, fallible creatures. We over-reach. We forget. We become self-centered. Eventually a weakness is exposed, and can be attacked, often by the very ones we have been oppressing and exploiting. That sets up the void for the emergence of the next super-power, the next empire.

In Jesus' day, Herod was a part of an empire that was well-established and just starting to enter the phase of self-centered forgetfulness. It would take a while yet for it to fall. But the pieces were already in place.

By contrast, the baby that Herod was so afraid of came to announce a new kind of kingdom, the Kingdom of God. It took Jesus' followers a long time to figure it out. But eventually his followers began to understand that God's kingdom was not going to be a human-built, earth-bound kingdom. This kingdom was first of all something that would exist in people's hearts and minds, where God was the one who ruled their actions and directed their choices. God's kingdom would be manifested, not in roads or ships, but in

how people treated one another, how people cared for creation, how people lived their lives.

We live in God's kingdom whenever we let God's priorities be our priorities. God's kingdom becomes stronger and has more influence in the world whenever we let God's ways influence how we live, and when others see that it makes a difference in what we do, not just what we call ourselves.

By contrast, the Kingdom of God is based not on fear, but on love. God's kingdom is based first and foremost on the good news that God loves us. Period. God forgives us. Period. And God calls us to do likewise. That means that love, not fear, is the basis for all our relationships. That means that we have every reason in the world to be joyful, and hopeful. There is no need to keep our heads down and avoid being noticed because we do not live in fear of punishment. We can live lives boldly trying to show God's love and forgiveness to the world around us. We can look at our failings and rejoice in that fact that they have been forgiven instead of living in shame for having failed in the first place. In God's kingdom there is true happiness, true contentment, which are the basis for generosity and compassion. Knowing you are loved enables you to love someone else. Knowing you have been blessed enables you to seek blessing for all.

And last of all, the third contrast between earthly empires and God's kingdom is that God's kingdom will never fail, will never end. God's kingdom does not depend on us, it is God's project. God is at work in us. So our failings, our shortcomings are not going to be the downfall of God's kingdom. God works through us in spite of those shortcomings. God even has a way of changing the broken parts of our lives into the tools, the perspectives, the gifts, we have to love and serve another.

One last thought here, because it seems to me it is all too easy to water down the impact of living a Kingdom of God life. It is much more than being nice, being charitable, being one of the "1000 points of light" of a previous Bush administration fame. If Jesus, at his birth, was such a threat to the empire of his day, and if his followers continued to be a threat somehow to the power structures of their day, ought not the followers of Jesus be a threat to the empire powers of our day? I do know that in some quarters that is still true, people who work for justice on behalf of the poor, people who work for peace where the powers want war.

The question is, is it true for me, for you? That can be the source for a little New Year's soul-searching perhaps. I am living God's Kingdom just enough to get the feel good stuff? Or am I living the Kingdom of God enough to be effective, to be a threat to empire power in my day? That's a scary thought. But Jesus wasn't born just to make everyone feel good. He was born to change the world. Herod knew something we might like to overlook. Jesus came to change everything. To defeat sin, and death, and fear; to bring us light, and life, and to let the power of God reign in our lives. May God's kingdom come, to us, and may God's will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

