

Sermon Arise, Shine; For Your Light Has Come

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St Giles Presbyterian Church, Ottawa, January 3, 2021)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

When I was young, my sister and I used to play this game. It doesn't really have a name, but let's call it 'Who wins?'. We would pair up heroes and/or villains from different comics, cartoons, or movies, and set them up in an imaginary duel, to see who would win. For example, Superman vs. Batman, who wins? Or ninja vs storm-trooper, who wins?

We would spend countless hours debating one another, providing reasons why one would come out ahead, and why one would lose out. Often, there were no correct answers, as these duels were imaginary to begin with. But the fun was in the process of trying to match vastly different abilities against technologies, across different time and space. Fun indeed!

Later on, I started to observe my two boys playing the same game as they were growing up, without any prompting nor instructions. They would go on for hours, debating each other on which character from which genre would come out ahead. Who wins? I suspect it probably is a common and timeless game many other children do play, one form or another.

So today, in the Epiphany Sunday when we celebrate the light of Jesus, first revealed to the Jews, then to the Gentiles, and now the world. I would like to invite you to re-live your childhood, and set up an imaginary duel between (drum rolls) Jesus of Nazareth in one corner, and Herod the Great in the other corner. Who wins?

Jesus, we have known as a small infant born some two thousands years ago, around the 4th year Before Common Era (BCE), in a manger in Bethlehem, by a young maiden, Mary, who was promised but yet to be wedded, to a poor carpenter named Joseph. Jesus grew up in a small fishing village near the shore of Galilee, and accomplished very little for the first thirty years of his life. He then preached about the coming Kingdom of God, started to teach others about love and forgiveness.

He gather around him a small group of disciples, most of them outcast, poor, with little education. For three years, Jesus went on foot around the regions of Galilee, Samaria and Judea, healing the sick and

curing the blind. Just when his influence was about to be taken seriously, one of his disciples betrayed him. Sold him out to be tried in a religious court, was eventually convicted on the charge of treason, and crucified on a cross — a punishment meted out to the worst kind of criminals. Throughout this journey, Jesus never fought back, never judged and always forgave.

Now at the other corner of the rink is Herod the Great. Herod, we the average people know very little about. He was born in 73 Before Common Era, and died shortly after the birth of Jesus — that is 4 BCE. He was an Edomite who had converted to Judaism. He was a capable military officer who quickly rose in rank at the court of the Hasmonean dynasty — the last independent state of Israel under Rome. Herod was also very smart, cunning, knew about playing politics. He aligned himself to the Romans, and with the army's support, he seized power and took Jerusalem by force. He was eventually declared by the Roman Senate as the "King of the Jews".

Herod the Great was known mostly for his building projects. During my recent trip to Israel a few years ago, I had visited the palace that Herod had built in Samaria. Even walking through the ruins in a strategically located hilltop, I could sense the grandiose extravagance of what it once was. The most notable building project that Herod commissioned must've been the expansion of the Second Temple in Jerusalem. It was a vastly rebuilt temple that greatly exceeded the glory of the first temple by Solomon. When the Pharisees — here I am referring to those devout rabbis that strictly practiced the Law of Moses — protested against the excess of Herod, he had them rounded up and executed by thousands. Josephus, the 1st century Jewish historian, recorded that event, and had this to say about Herod the Great, "[he] never left off avenging and punishing, every day, those that had chosen to be of the party of his enemies." (Antiquities of the Jews — Book XV, chapter 1)

Herod was also extremely paranoid and unforgiving. In the quest to stay in power, he had assassinated or executed many of his opponents, including all the remnant of Hasmonean dynasty, which also included his 2nd wife and the two sons born through her. In his dying days (through an unknown sickness), Herod was so concerned that no one would mourn his death, that he had commanded a large group of distinguished men to come to the capital city. He then gave order that they would be killed at the time of his death, just so an outpouring of grief would take place. (Sheesh! You think Trump is bad? He is nothing compared to Herod the Great.)

So in this fictional duel between Jesus of Nazareth and Herod the Great, who wins? The fun thing about playing this game is that it could take hours, had we been able to gather around and debate one another. There really is no right answer, it's all in the process (so they say). Let us move on.

Earlier I had said that the duel is fictional, it is not quite so entirely. The author of the Gospel according to Matthew had recorded in chapter 2, a brief encounter between the infant Jesus and Herod in his dying days, through the visit of the wisemen from the East, commonly known as Magi.

Magi were members of a priestly caste in ancient Persia and Babylon, who interpreted signs using astrology, astronomy and dreams. They then offered political and military advise to powerful kings. It should be noted that Matthew did not record the actual number of these wisemen. Three are commonly assumed, most likely due to the number of gifts they brought.

These wisemen came from the East to the court of Herod in Jerusalem, following a bright shinning star in the night sky. They asked, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." (Matthew 2:2) When Herod, the actual King of the Jews, heard this, the Scripture describes that he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him. I could just imagine all the court officials, trembling at the paranoia of an insecure king. Herod then asked the Magi to follow the star, and report back to him of who and where the child was, so he could also go and 'pay homage'.

The Magi agreed, then proceeded to Bethlehem. Upon entering the house where the star stopped above, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they knelt down and worshipped him. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Gold is a fitting gift for a king; frankincense (a kind of incense) is a fitting gift for a god; and myrrh is a most fitting gift for burial, pointing to the eventual death of the Son of God. Then having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, the Magi wisely left for their own country by another road.

The story of their worship of Jesus contributed to making believers of all nations, as foretold by Isaiah the prophet, in chapter 60,

Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.

For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the Lord will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.
Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

In this not so imaginary duel of Jesus vs Herod, the gentle baby Jesus barely edged out ahead, but only with the guidance of God, through a star and a dream.

As we reflect on this story Jesus, on the first Sunday of a New Year, which is also known as the Epiphany of the Lord, we celebrate the light of Jesus coming into our darken world. A new light, a new year, and a new beginning.

To us, the duel between Herod and Jesus is representative of the duel between the world of humankind and the Kingdom of God. Between the values of this world – that is power at all cost, wealth by all means, unforgiveness at all time, and the value of the Kingdom – that is faith, hope and love.

The story of the Epiphany is the beginning of a long story of how God demonstrates power in Jesus not to overrule us but to dwell among us. We are reminded, according to the Gospels and the rest of the New Testaments, that the power of God is not by might, but is rather unexpected, vulnerable, and lift-giving. The power of God is not through conquer or massacre, but through second chances, perhaps going home by another path, and spreading the good news like seeds, good news that transform all of us, not from top down but from bottom up.

This struggle between the value of the world and the value of the Kingdom is still alive. The choice is ours to make. It may not be drastic changes, or a complete overhaul of our lives, but a simple resolution. Not those worldly resolution of more exercise, better diet, or losing a few pounds, but the resolution to follow the light of Jesus, as the only guide in our lives.

Arise, shine; for your light has come.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.