

## The Time Between: On Being Lame Duck Christians

Sermon by [Cynthia A. Jarvis](#)

January 2, 2011, Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill

**Micah 5:2-5a**

**Matthew 2:1-20**

*“When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.”*

“There is no visible disorder,” declares W.H. Auden’s Herod as though to convince himself. “No crime—what could be more innocent than the birth of an artisan’s child? Today has been one of those perfect winter days, cold, brilliant, and utterly still, when the bark of the shepherd’s dog carries for miles, and the great wild mountains come up quite close to the city walls, and the mind feels intensely awake, and this evening as I stand at this window high up in the citadel there is nothing in the whole magnificent panorama of plain and mountains to indicate that the Empire is threatened by a danger more dreadful than any invasion of Tartars on racing camels or conspiracy of the Praetorian Guard.”

But, of course, the Empire was threatened, and King Herod had every reason to be troubled at the news implied in the question of these wise men from the east. “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?” they asked the inhabitants of Jerusalem in all innocence. “For we have seen his star in the east and have come to worship him.” Herod, Matthew tells us, was troubled by the news.

In the first and most obvious place, Herod was troubled because he suspected, in this birth, that his power was about to be threatened. If in Bethlehem a new king had been born, a king foretold by the prophets, then this child would grow up to spell death for Herod’s reign over the land of Judah. No longer would he be the one to command armies into battle. No more could he decree amnesty for the rich and send the poor empty away. Moreover, the tax ordered by Caesar Augustus in Luke’s account of Christ’s birth, earmarked in part for Herod’s coffers--the wealth soon to be at his disposal--would be given into the hands of another. In sum, the power Herod held by virtue of his politics—the power of armies and authority and acquisitions—was in danger of being taken over by a child born of Nazarene artisans. How preposterous, he thought, and yet this was no time to be naive about the course of human history.

So, given even the remote possibility of such a threat, Herod’s only real option was to assert with dispatch the one tangible power he held by virtue of his office: the power of death. He would order the slaughter of innocents, hoping that somewhere in the crowd, the would-be usurper of his power also would be eliminated.

What Herod did not understand, nor do we these centuries and centuries hence, was that Christ’s birth signaled something eternally more radical entering human history than a mere change of regimes or a despot toppled. The power-that-ruled-by-might was not simply to change hands. Rather in Jesus Christ, the reign of the power of death was about to come to an end. In its stead, the power of weakness that is the only true power, that is life-giving power, that is the power of self-giving love, was about to be revealed in a manger: vulnerable and weak and lowly.

As we in these latter days have come to know, Christ’s birth was simply the beginning of trouble for Herod and his ilk! In fact, the life, death and resurrection of

this child born into the world's darkness has continued to trouble every ruler and nation down the dark corridors of time, continued to trouble all who have presumed to wield the power of death, for good or for ill, over the course of human history and over history's inhabitants. So here at this new beginning for human history because the savior of the world has been born in Bethlehem, here in the birth of an artisan's child as he was viewed from the window high up in the citadel, the defeat of the politics of death is foreshadowed; even as, at the end, on a cross, by Pilate's decree, the defeat of death itself is vouchsafed to us forevermore.

Of course, what the exercise of true power looks like in the midst of our own human histories is always difficult to discern. We who must live in the reality of world politics believe we have no choice but to meet Herod's power in kind, lest we appear vulnerable to the world and evil be left unchecked. Yet do you not begin to see in the manger that if God chose what is weak and vulnerable in the world for the manifestation of the power of God's love, for the revelation of the power which alone is worthy of our worship, then it must said of every so-called superpower throughout human history, no matter how liberal or enlightened it means to be, that every human pretense to power and its possession is determined to miss the manger by a millenium or two!

Parenthetically, the only hope in our nation's present darkness would be for a star to appear in the sky over Washington leading unsuspecting legislators to the crib of a hungry child in need of feeding or a homeless family in need of shelter or the sick in need of healing or the hopelessly unemployed in need of a crumb from our table, that we might in the other's face see the Christ in all of his vulnerability. Not and oligarchic distance from but engagement with the humanity of the other, with the least of these, has something to do with what the power that is power looks like in the world.

Sadly, the only hint we have had of wise men following a star, in my opinion with which many here would differ, has happened during this so-called lame duck time between when a significant number of legislators—who had either decided to step down or had been defeated—were no longer beholden to the self-interest of their constituents or their financiers. Daring the exercise of a different sort of power, a power afforded them in their own weakness, they defied the pundits and cast their votes for the things that make for peace, for justice, for the welfare and safety of the least of these, for an order that threatens the likes of you and me. My guess is that these went home by another way.

No doubt this all begins to hint at why not only Herod was troubled at the news of Christ's birth but, in the second place, why all Jerusalem was troubled with him. For as surely as Jerusalem was oppressed by the politics of death, so surely were they secured by the same. "People behave," wrote Christian ethicist Paul Lehmann, "not only according to and within the relations, possibilities and limits that are given.... They also behave in relation and response to powers and possibilities resident within and among themselves which give shape to the way people are what they do and do what they are."

All Jerusalem's inhabitants were what they did and did what they were in relation to news of Christ's birth, because their relation and response to present day power arrangements did not displease them: it, in fact, defined them. They were warm enough, fed enough, secure enough to care nothing about the birth of an artisan's child in Bethlehem. Though Matthew implies more. Herod understood the heart of the trouble from the start: bring me word that I too might worship him, he commanded. They were troubled because his birth called into question the placement of Jerusalem's faith and the object of their worship.

Why, we wonder, do the inhabitants of Afghanistan not rise up against the Taliban on their own behalf? Why, we ask, do people not rebel against tyrants that oppress them? Why, coming closer to home, do spouses not leave households where they are abused? Why do human beings prefer the darkness to the light? And why do we not refuse the darkness that passes for our own enlightened existence? Trusting the near at hand, no matter how mean, learning from birth to obey the voice of authority, no matter how harsh, bowing down before another who would seem to hold in human hands the power of life and death, believing in a social order that is said to be better than most: these are the realities that find us behaving in relation and response to the powers and possibilities resident within and among us which give shape to the way we are what we do and do what we are.

So we read that Herod was troubled at Christ's birth and all Jerusalem with him and, if we were honest, if we really looked at those things we trust to uphold and secure our own lives, we would have to admit that Christ's birth troubles us too. For his star summons even good Christian citizens like us to leave the present power arrangements, which have given shape to the way we are what we do and do what we are. His star, if we are to follow it, necessitates a turn away from the human powers of death-dealing to the power that can only be known in all vulnerability. His star leads the wise to the One who alone is able to uphold us in life and in death.

Lehmann calls this turn toward his star the "willful acquisition of vulnerability," which "underlies the priority of weakness over strength, of humility over pride in the possession of capacities, opportunities, achievements....The willful acquisition of vulnerability," he says, "gives priority to the common life over individual advancement...in political and cultural existence and activity." In other words, to kneel with shepherds and kings before the birth of him who troubles us too is to bow down before the child who has come to save us all, without exception, from life without him. It is to be gathered by the power of his vulnerability (which is to say, his self-giving, self-emptying love), embraced by the vulnerability for which we were made until, by God's grace, Christ alone becomes the power and possibility resident within and among us which gives shape to the way we are what we do and do what we are.

"Naturally," concludes Auden's Herod, "this cannot be allowed to happen. Civilization must be saved even if this means sending for the military, as I suppose it does. How dreary. Why is it that in the end civilization has always to call in these professional tidiers...? Why couldn't this wretched infant be born somewhere else? Why can't people be sensible?"

My troubled friends, if in this season his star has led us to the same stable sought and found of old, has led us to this table wherein Pilate's sentence would finally appear to fulfill Herod's decree, we are those who must choose, quite soon, before which power we will bow down: before the power of death which promises to secure our lives, or before the power revealed in the weakness and vulnerability of a Nazarene child. At the end of this time between, at the hour when we lie to die, only one will prove the power to redeem the course of human history from death to life eternal. Therefore the good news on the first Sunday of a so-called new year is this: in the child born long ago in Bethlehem, in the One who this day has claimed you as his own, your redemption even now is drawing nigh. Thanks be to God!