**Four Kings and a Baby**

**Matthew 2:1-12**

Rev. Nancy S. Lynn

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Do you remember that old movie, “Three Men and A Baby”?  It was the top-grossing film of 1987 - a great comedy about the antics and adventures of three New York City bachelors trying to learn to be fathers when they suddenly have a baby girl to care for.  Well, in the church calendar, this weekend is Epiphany, when we remember the story not of three men and a baby but four kings and a baby - the baby whose birth we celebrated not even two weeks ago.   This story isn’t as funny, but it does play a central role in teaching us how to live our faith as we enter this new year.

So, our first king is King Herod.  He was one of those people who is neither entirely good, nor entirely evil. Of course, that is true of all of us - it’s just that with Herod, everything happened in extremes.   Historically, we know quite a lot about him.  On the one hand, he did a lot of good in his thirty-seven years as a puppet king appointed by the Roman Empire. He was the only ruler of Palestine to keep peace and create order out of disorder for any extended period of time. He did a lot of building, including building the Temple of Jerusalem. And he could be generous. He remitted taxes when times were tough; he even melted down his own gold plate to buy corn for the starving people.

But - you knew that “but” was coming, didn’t you? - he was known also for his insecurity and his viciousness - a bad combination.  He was easily threatened and very suspicious. He couldn’t bear the thought of losing his throne and would not hesitate to get rid of any threat to his power. So, he assassinated anyone he saw as a threat – his wife, his mother-in-law, even three of his sons.

Herod and his fear are the backdrop to an otherwise engaging story about kings and stars and God’s promise of hope and salvation.   Three strangers, our other three kings, show up at Herod’s door in Jerusalem asking where they might find the child who has been born to be King of the Jews. Not surprisingly, Herod is frightened.  After all, he considers himself King of the Jews.  He immediately wants to know who this rival is, this threat to his power.  Eventually, Herod’s fear will lead him to order the slaughter of all Jewish boys under the age of two, but that comes a little later in the story.  Suffice it to say for now that Herod was a scared and a scary guy.

Such a contrast to the three kings from the east.  Unlike Herod, historically, we know almost nothing about these three.  There is a lot of lore built up around them, but most of it isn’t actually in the Bible.  The Bible never says there were three of them, that they were kings, or that they had names.  They are actually referred to as wise men, or sometimes as magi, from the East.  Our best guess is that they were from Persia and were Zoroastrians - members of a group that studied the stars, much like astrologists do, to learn about future and significant events.  Throughout the ancient world, it was believed that a bright star would shine at the birth of a new leader.  And so, when our three wise men saw a bright new star shining, they discerned a new leader had been born and went to find him.

These three are seekers - open to adventure and new opportunities, anxious to greet a new leader, whoever he may be.

And so we have four kings - or a king and three wise men.  One who will accept nothing that is a risk to his power.  Three of whom risk everything to follow the power of a star. One who operates directly out of fear.  Three who, when they arrive at the place where Jesus is found, are “overwhelmed with joy”.

Of course, we all live some 2000 years later in the 21st century United States with lives much different from those of these kings.  And yet, as we enter a new year, we have the same choice before us - do we live our lives threatened and fearful or do we live in search of new potential, new hope, new opportunities to be overwhelmed with joy?

We know what living in fear looks like.  We see it around us every day.  Fear is the catalyst of so much of what is destructive in our world today.  It is fear that leads humanity to cling to so many of our -isms - racism, sexism, classism.  It is fear that leads us to exclude - to close our doors and our hearts to those who are different, to the LGBTQ community, to the homeless vet on the street or the impoverished single mother on welfare.  And it is fear that leads us to pour more money into retirement savings and bank accounts and less into the hands of agencies and organizations that serve the least among us.

This is Herod’s path - and we certainly all have the potential to follow in his footsteps.  Yet, I think one of the lessons we take from our three kings from the east is that there is a different way.  That we can step into life as seekers, open to whatever surprises God has in store for us, and prepared to be overwhelmed with joy.

Now, I have to say that when I started working on this sermon, that phrase “overwhelmed with joy” jumped out at me from the scripture passage.  I got to thinking about what it really means.  What is joy?  Where does joy come from?  What characterizes an experience that leads us to feel overwhelmed with joy?  My initial answer for myself was that the time I remember feeling overwhelmed with joy was the day Emily was born.  Her birth, for me, was the most miraculous, joy-filled, amazing experience I’ve ever had.

That said, I was sure that there are other experiences that would lead people to such intense feelings of joy.  So, on a whim, I did an informal survey on Facebook.  I asked people to share the times when they have felt this way.  The answers were wide-ranging and fun to read.  Many people also brought up the birth of a child or grandchild, niece or nephew.  Or they spoke of things related to those children - the first time their child fell asleep in their arms or having their grandchild run into their arms saying “I love you”, witnessing a child’s wedding or watching their child become a parent, seeing their children accomplish or achieve something, watching their two nearly grown children head out to ice skate together, seeing their children more excited about giving than receiving.

There were other sorts of answers, too, though.  Learning that a relative doesn’t have cancer.  Laughing with a sister.  Waking up from major surgery.  Marrying the love of their life.  Watching a spouse be promoted.  Celebrating Christmas Eve in worship.  Being ordained.  Listening to music.  Spending time in nature.  Watching the unfolding of spring.

So many answers - yet, it seems to me they all had one thing in common.  All of these experiences that leave us feeling overwhelmed with joy grow out of that which is divine in each of us - the characteristics we have that are most God-like, most Christ-like.  Our appreciation of beauty, particularly the beauty of creation.  Our ability to create - create new life, create music.  Our hope for the future and for the unfolding of our own lives and the lives of others.  And, perhaps more than anything else, our ability to connect authentically with each other and with God, which really means our ability to love.

Joy is born of God’s imprint on each and every one of us, which not only means we can be overwhelmed with joy but also that joy is always available to us.  When we reach out in love to another person or to God, we create the seedbed of joy.  If you want more joy in your life, open your heart and love somebody.

The thing is, though, that if joy comes from intimate connection with God and creation and with each other, joy is also risky.  To connect, authentically connect, we have to allow ourselves to be vulnerable - vulnerable to loss, to pain, to disappointment, to brokenness.  And being vulnerable, taking risks with our hearts, is scary.

Is it worth it?  That comes down to what you really want.  As Dr. Brene Brown puts it in her book Daring Greatly, “Vulnerability is the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy, and creativity.  It is the source of hope, empathy, accountability, and authenticity.  If we want greater clarity in our purpose or deeper and more meaningful spiritual lives, vulnerability is the path...And while embracing our vulnerabilities is risky, it’s not nearly as dangerous as giving up.”  Giving up on love, giving up on hope, giving up on joy.

Desmond Tutu takes this a step further.  “Discovering more joy does not save us from the inevitability of hardship and heartbreak.  In fact, we may cry more easily, but we will laugh more easily, too.  Perhaps we are just more alive.  Yet as we discover more joy, we can face suffering in a way that ennobles rather than embitters.  We have hardship without becoming hard.  We have heartbreaks without being broken.”

In other words, as risky as it may seem, when we can set aside our fear and allow ourselves to seek out joy, we will be better equipped to deal with fear in the future.

So, here we stand at the crossroads of a new year.  We’ve got Herod and the path of fear.  We’ve got three magi and the path to joy.  Which will we choose?  Will we reach out of ourselves, allowing ourselves to know and be known at deeper levels by our friends and family and, even perhaps, our enemies.  Or will we retreat in fear, barricading ourselves to protect ourselves from hurt?

I think that for those of us who sincerely want to follow Christ we find our answer at the foot of that star.  The answer is all about the baby.  We who follow this baby, this child who is the incarnation of God, we are called to seek joy - even when despair lingers nearby.  To kneel at the foot of the manger with open-hearts - to risk loving, risk connection, risk hope, risk creating - because, ultimately, the baby is our king and we are called to live out his kingdom.

May it be so. Amen.