

Today's Gospel sounds like something out of a fairy tale: exotic foreigners come from afar bringing gifts to a newborn king because they have seen "his star" in the East, at its rising. They have come to the king's palace in a kingdom of little note, actually, an occupied province of a great empire.

The reigning king, whose name is Herod, is afraid. *He* has not fathered a new heir. Smelling a threat to his throne, he determines to use the foreigners to find the child, and then have him killed. The shadow of darkness and death hangs heavy over the cradle. But, through a supernatural intervention, the baby is saved; he is safe, for now. He will grow up to fulfill his mission: not only to save his people but also to restore the dignity of human nature, as created in the beginning, by his Father.

All the stuff of fairy tales is here: mystery, unlikely hope and promise in someone humble and weak, opposed by a darkness at work in the fearful heart of a villain; and, in the very end, an ending both too good to be true and, as Frederick Buechner says, too good *not* to be true.¹

What does it all mean? We have seen these mysterious visitors so often around this time of year, as children or grown men in bathrobes or beautifully sewn costumes, solemnly bearing gifts; in figures crowded in with angels, shepherds, sheep and the holy family in the nativity scene on the mantelpiece. We may have lost sight of the mystery of the story.

There *was* something mysterious. The East, the Orient, was exotic even in first century Jerusalem, at the western edge of Asia. This was not the first time that an exotic personage from the East had come calling at the royal court in Jerusalem. The Queen of Sheba had made a memorable visit long before, remembered in the Book of Kings. She had come bearing gifts—spices, very much gold, precious stones—to the court of King Solomon, when ancient Israel was still at the height of its power and glory. The Queen was so overcome by the wisdom and prosperity she found that "there was no more spirit in her." (1 Kings 10:7) It was all so marvelous she was struck dumb.

Some 800 years later, the circumstances in Jerusalem were much changed. Herod the king ruled only at the pleasure of an emperor in Rome. And this time, the glory the visitors came to honor would be found not in a palace in Jerusalem but in an ordinary home, several miles south in the sleepy town of Bethlehem.

Unlike Solomon's visitor, these were not royalty (though often depicted as kings), but scientists. They were astronomers who studied the heavens and interpreted what they saw there to make meaning of events on earth. They must have had a prophecy connecting a star (a

¹Buechner, Frederick, Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy and Fairy Tale (New York, NY, Harper & Row, 1977)

supernova? A conjunction of planets?) with the birth of a new king. An auspicious birth of a child with special attributes and a special destiny for his people, it would have been, to draw them so far into the unknown to see him.

Herod senses this, as well; he is shaken up by the magi's question: "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising/in the East, and have come to pay him homage" (worship him, prostrate themselves before him). Herod had been *appointed* to reign. This child, whoever and wherever he was, was *born* king of the Jews. This was unnerving, and did not bode well for Herod. Like many a villain before and since, in fairy tales and history, Herod decides to kill the one who threatens him, to make him disappear so Herod can go on as before, undisturbed. This even as he, Herod, is the one who suspects that the child the magi seek is the Messiah, the Christ, the anointed one of the God of Israel.

It boggles the mind. But Herod is afraid. Herod is human. Wrapped in fear we can do terrible, unspeakable things—whatever it takes to hold on to what we know, even when what we know it is not enough, or is not right or true, or what our heart and soul really long for.

Herod is not the only one who is afraid here; all Jerusalem is frightened with him. Suggested by some that what Jerusalem fears is Herod's reaction to threatening news because Herod was a violent man. That may be so. It also may be that "all Jerusalem" is the part of ourselves that fears and resists real change, or the promise and possibility of meeting that Something Else, Someone Else, the One who offers fullness of life that is real.

Even when we know that the way we have been going, the things we've been about, have not been working, it can seem so much riskier to step out into a new way (to returning home by another way?). It is hard to change our own patterns of behavior, even harder to change whole systems and institutions.

Some of us are having a good laugh these days at the Democratic Party—the party of change, you may remember. Party leaders are all set to get bogged down in trying to prevent the newly appointed senator from Illinois from being seated. They do not like the governor who appointed him. Who does? But they told him not to do it, and he seems to have outsmarted them. No matter; they'll put up a fight as a matter of principle. No change there, just squandered time, misdirected resources, when there is real, important business to be about. Instead, we have comic relief; or maybe we laugh so as not to cry..

But we all are weeping over missile strikes and now the invasion of Gaza, and rockets fired into the Negev. Four hundred and sixty Palestinians are dead in Gaza; four dead in Israel. Each one a child of God, each life precious. A whole population, 1.5 million people, live strangled in Gaza, with food, fuel, medical supplies, all things necessary to life held by Israel at the level of barest survival. Each one a child of God. Israeli families in the Negev live, work, go to bed at night in fear of falling rockets. Each life precious. What could be riskier than all of that, that so clearly is not working for the people of Gaza or Israel?

It is hard to see what could move either side to change position—Palestinians to resist by non-violent means; Israelis to respect UN resolutions and the life and dignity of the Palestinian people. The shadow of death and darkness hangs heavy over the land of the One who is holy; we are witnessing some of the darkest part of this history. Not that Israel and Palestine is the only land where this is so. Not that this is the first time that the life and future of the people of the holy land have been so threatened.

We heard this morning from the prophet Jeremiah, who was active as a prophet in just such a time, a painful time for him and his people. He gave dire warnings over many years that ruin that lay ahead if leaders and people did not change direction. He was denounced, locked up more than once. They didn't change. He didn't change, but kept on telling what he saw and heard. Everything that he foresaw came to pass: the people were carried off to Babylon and all Jerusalem was laid waste.

Yet in the midst of all that darkness, even before the final siege and destruction of Jerusalem, Jeremiah was given another vision for the people. We heard part of it this morning.

What is remarkable is that in the darkness that was Jerusalem, with much of the population already in exile in Babylon, and knowing that the worst was still coming, Jeremiah was able to see all the way into and through that darkness to the other side of ruin and 70 years of exile. Though he would not live to experience it himself, he believed that God would ransom, redeem, restore God's people "from hands too strong for [them]" that "they shall be radiant over the goodness of the Lord . . ." and "their life shall become like a watered garden . . ." (31:11, 12) He trusted that deeply in the goodness and unwavering love of God.

Now, if you were to say, *Well, of course, things were desperate, what else could he have fallen back on besides trust in God?* (meaning, perhaps, there was no realistic hope to hope in, that it was like believing in fairy tales). I would say that's right. Things were desperate. All he had, all any of us has, is trust in God's desire and intention to save us all from our sorrow and sin, futility and failure, darkness and despair.

In Christ, God revealed that this desire and intention is not for one people only but *all* people, people of every color, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, political opinion, people of every kind, to be restored to God and to one another, not by force but God's own self-giving love. Sounds kind of like a fairy tale—except for this one thing: the "immeasurable greatness of God's power," of which the letter to the Ephesians speaks. The letter goes on to say in the next verse (not included by the lectionary today): "God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead . . ." A power of immeasurable greatness, indeed, that changed and changes even death into everlasting life.

Into this power of God in Christ, the power of the resurrection, Kieran's parents and godparents—Henry, Nicole, Maggie and William—bring him to be baptized today. In this hope to which he and all of us are called, we promise to support him. Kieran's parents and godparents

promise by their “prayers and witness [to] help [him] grow into the full stature of Christ,” and I know that you will make your prayers and give the witness of your lives to Kieran, too, because that is who you are and how you live.

Even as we pray for the people of Gaza, the West Bank and Israel, and for all those in places where there is war and violence; as we work to form positions and support policies that hold some promise of peace, and try to live peaceably ourselves, the power of God’s love revealed in Christ already is at work in the darkest places in the world and in our lives. In Christ, God already and impossibly has restored the worth and worthiness of human nature. God will yet restore all people to God’s self and one another. It just may be too good *not* to be true.