



THE UNITED CHURCH OF CANADA

CANADIAN MEMORIAL CHURCH
& CENTRE FOR PEACE

Preached by Rev. Bruce Sanguin

Matthew 2:1-12

January 10, 2010

Epiphany Sunday

“Herod and the Magi”

This morning I want to deal with Herod, primarily in the interior realm of our lives – our inner Herods. The story of the Magi’s meeting with Herod is an important part of the Christmas story, but it’s not historical fact. It is a creation of the author of Matthew’s gospel. The writer took the story of the Pharaoh’s order to execute all male Hebrew children, (found in the book of Exodus) and brilliantly adapted it for the story of Jesus’ birth.

And, despite not being historical fact, it conveys spiritual truth. There is a part of our personality that is constellated around an emotion so deep and pervasive that it acts to sabotage any idea, belief, behavior, attitude, or person that threatens its existence. That part of us is the ego and the emotion that drives it is fear. This morning I want to look at the story of the Magi’s visit to Herod as a story of the ego, and how far it will go to protect its status as king or queen of our lives.

First, I need to say a few words about the ego. The word is a source of much confusion, and without defining what we mean by it, conversations often run aground with people assuming they mean the same thing when they use the word. But rarely is that true.

First, I need to talk about a popular understanding of ego. If a person has an “ego”, in this sense, he or she is thought to be narcissistic. He is full of himself, and every conversation, every film, every book ever written, every gesture ever made in a room full of strangers, is a reference to him. The universe is perceived primarily as a commentary about his needs, his psychological journey, or his personal worth. Up until recently we thought that the narcissist must have suffered damage in early life – so diminished was he through lack of attention or direct abuse, that the inflated ego was compensation for a diminished sense of self.

But recent research seems to be showing that the narcissist simply has too much self-esteem. It’s not a compensation for anything. It’s an overestimation of his or her skills, talents, and general importance.¹ He just thinks that he’s awesome. It’s a cultural disease that started in the 60’s and flourished in the “me” generation. (As a sidebar, this implies that we need to be a little bit careful with fire-hosing our children with compliments and

¹ See Jean Twenge’s research: *Generation Me: Why Today’s Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—And More Miserable Than Ever Before* in 2006.

praise for just showing up, and making them the centre of the universe.) When many of us say that somebody has an ego, often we're referring to the narcissistic self.

When Freud coined the term "ego", he simply meant the "I" – the part of us that we think of when we think of "me". This self was buffeted about by the superego or overego, which is like our inner grown up, and the id – or the "it", all those unconscious impulses, which until we bring into consciousness, rule us from below. The ego was the self-organizing system that did the best it could to fashion from this internal vortex of energies a coherent, functional self - a minor miracle. In this sense, a healthy ego is our friend, and much of life energy is about learning to be civil, hold down a job, and the capacity to not do too much damage in relationships and maybe even give a little back. Seriously, if the human race could advance this far, it would be nirvana. Let's say, we're able to bring this off. We would have accomplished the fashioning of a healthy *psychological* self-system.

So, when I refer to ego this is what I'm talking about. Now this ego, or psychological/personal self, develops. There is a line of development called the self-line, which tracks the evolution of the self-system. We have the capacity to perpetually transcend and include earlier expressions of ourselves. What you called "me" 10 years ago, for example, has hopefully expanded. You see a

different world than you did a decade ago.

But when the self-system gets stuck, it is because of the presence of fear. Under stress, our egos will always regress to points in life when fear caused it to retract. This retraction was for the purpose of defending us. But the defense was so fierce that the mechanisms and processes we put in place to protect ourselves, start to function to box the self in. Freedom to act in the world is restricted by avoiding any situation, thought, person, which might trigger the fear.

For example, I have this deep fear of being perceived as uncaring. So, for much of my life I pretended that I cared more than I actually did. When I heard in seminary that being a minister was all about taking care of people – a dubious definition – I freaked. To my mind, this was a vocation with 100's of daily opportunities to be exposed as the uncaring, inadequate, emotionally disappointing person that I was pretending not to be. So, I defended myself from having to actually feel my fear – to make it conscious and ask myself what it was about. These days, I'm pretty much Mother Theresa!

To get to the point, our inner Herod is that part of our personality that is organizing our lives, restricting our freedom, and ultimately sabotaging the spiritual impulse because of fear. Herod is our wounded ego or self that is organized around fear. In this biblical story, the Magi report to Herod that there is one born who is said to be King of the Jews. Well,

Herod is King, and will not abide any contenders for the throne.

Spiritually, the Magi represent an invitation for us to reorganize our lives around a higher spiritual consciousness – Christ consciousness. Herod is the part of us that, perhaps surprisingly, feels threatened by this invitation. Our inner Herod is intent upon sabotaging this spiritual birth. In the Christmas story Herod issues a death order.

There is a saying from Scripture that “the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom”. We tend to re-interpret “fear” as “awe” in order to get away from the traditional associations with a God we need to fear. But if we said instead, “*understanding* our fear of God (or anything else) is the beginning of wisdom”, we’d have the foundation for a spiritual practice that could liberate us. Our inner Herod, you see, is not crazy. He or she is merely acting in our defense – or in the gospel story – in the defense of Caesar’s kingdom. He believes that the birth of this Christ child is genuinely a threat to the throne. Likewise, my inner Herod is doing its best to make sure that I don’t get hurt, embarrassed, or shamed. It doesn’t want me to be put in a position where I might be seen as a fraud, or fail at a calling that is beyond ego’s capacity. So, what is required is a practice dedicated to surfacing our deepest fears and squarely facing how our defense system is holding our evolutionary journey back. We need to deal with Herod – not as an evil enemy, but as a frightened ally.

The spiritual journey is to the stable – to Christ-consciousness. Yes, we have an inner Herod. But we also have Magi – the presence of sacred wisdom. This part of us is conscious of Herod’s fear that threatens to sabotage our sacred vocation. Our inner Magi understand Herod’s fears, but refuses to be taken in by his various schemes, which are legion and ingenious. Once you practice the awareness of fear for a while, you begin to realize that our wounded ego is very resourceful and very resilient. Through this practice of bringing our Magi to bear on our fears over time, those fears will certainly dissipate, but my own sense is that they will never disappear.

Sometimes, we just need to outsmart Herod. Which is what the Magi in the story do. They listen, but they do not obey. They are asked to send word to Caesar the moment they find the child. Of course, they do not follow orders, knowing that Caesar is like a jealous older sibling who is not at all thrilled when the new baby arrives on the scene.

Here’s the thing. I mentioned that the ego is the self-organizing principle, or system, of our personality that mediates between superego and id’s impulses. I can tell you that this self-organizing capacity is a deep mystery, and if any developmental psychologist tells you that they understand it, they are lying. They might be able to tell you how it functions, and when it is not functioning well, but as to *why* there even exists a self-organizing impulse

that is hard-wired to evolve, we're on hallowed ground. A healthy self, as I've said, is a miracle.

As miraculous as the self is, thus far I've merely described our *psychological* or *personal* self. The Magi's invitation is to go beyond our personal self to a transpersonal Self or soul. When the self reaches a certain level of evolutionary development, the foundation has been established to transcend the personal self. Some call this the "unique"² self. Others call it the "impersonal" self.³ Still others call it "soul". Whatever you call it, this is an impulse to transcend all the dramas and dreams of the personal self, by tapping into a more universal or cosmic sense of self. This larger self knows one's own personal narrative, and all that has gone into this story. That story is never lost. It is simply contextualized. One begins to identify more with the evolutionary purposes of the universe – what am I doing here? What are we doing here? What's my life for? How can I serve the sacred evolutionary purposes of Spirit? Who might I be if I didn't allow fear to rule me? We awaken to our bigger identity in Christ.

This is what we're attempting to do at Canadian Memorial – create an evolutionary culture in which people can learn to go beyond their fear-based personalities, and identify with increasingly with the soul – their Christ self. Think about soul as the deepest

aspect of our identity that is still distinct – it's still "you", but a bigger you. As you move into this transpersonal realm, two things begin to happen simultaneously. At the level of the individual, your *unique* identity begins to emerge. This is the new thing God is doing in the universe that can only come through the distinctive presence that is "you". This is your unique creative expression and contribution that is needed by God or the universe – the you that stands trembling at the evolutionary edge. At the same time, your sense of self becomes, paradoxically, more collective. The membrane between you and other people, creatures, plants, stars becomes more permeable as you experience yourself as one part of a much larger whole. You are the part that manifests the whole – a perfect representation of all that is, gathered up in "you". This unity of your most creative, unique self and your identification with the whole of reality is your soul.

It's an exacting journey even getting a glimpse of your soul. You have to be free enough from your basic fears and survival instincts to realize your bigger identity. And then when you realize that you are actually bigger, much bigger than your personal, psychological self, you will need to deal with Herod again. The fear doesn't go away. It just scales up. The stakes become higher.

Your soul has a singular focus, symbolically to get to Bethlehem and pay homage to the sacred child. Your soul wants to fly to God, and Herod

² Rabbi Dr. Marc Gafni

³ Andrew Cohen and the EnlightenNext community

thinks your gifts were meant for him. I don't want to stretch the metaphor too severely. It is enough to say that many fears will surface the moment you seriously consider going beyond your psychological or personal self, and identifying with the soul-self.

You will dream bigger, and a voice will sound: "Who do you think you are?"

You will lose interest in egoic dramas that had been a deep source of fascination, and a voice will sound: "You are nobody without these dramas and narratives. Cling to them for dear life."

You will decide to begin a regular spiritual practice, and the distractions and excuses for not starting will gather in number and in urgency.

You will take action, and then be confronted by roadblocks and setbacks.

You will be filled with conviction, and then in the middle of the night you be filled with doubts. Your project will

seem hopeless, your dreams grandiose, your strategy ill conceived.

"Fear not", the angels said to the shepherds, to Mary, to Joseph, to the Magi and to practically anybody who got involved in anyway with Jesus of Nazareth – because his project was soul-sized, and so it awakened the soul, which in turned roused Herod. "Fear not", actually means "bring consciousness to your fears". Set them in the context of this sacred vocation to identify with your bigger, Christ-loving, Spirit-called, all-consuming passion for the Holy.

This story is an invitation to trust the wisdom and guidance of your inner Magi. They will lead you to the stable of your soul. The final detail of the story is that after the Magi visit the Christ-child, they go home another way. Church is what we call "going home by another way." It's not the way of the world, friends. It is a path of becoming conscious of whatever fears prevent us from flying to the heart of God.