

Out of Egypt
Matthew 2:13-23
January 1, 2023
First Presbyterian, Luling

One of the lessons I've learned these past months attending horse therapy is that the horses pick up on human emotions. If you bounce into the barn, shouting with exuberance and running erratically and making quick, unpredictable movements, well, then, the horses are going to be anxious and hard to deal with. They can't distinguish between happy chaos and unhappy chaos. If, on the other hand, you enter the barn quietly and slowly, speak calmly, and move deliberately around the horses, they're going to be calm and docile and cooperative.

I don't know why it took someone pointing this out to me to make me realize it. Our emotions are contagious, especially in the way we express them. And no emotion is as contagious as fear. Creating the conditions that lead other people to fear is easy. Politicians do it all the time, often by creating an enemy who threatens our well being or financial stability or comfort. Presto, we're afraid, and we are ready to vote for the person who promises to conquer that enemy and therefore get rid of the fear.

I want to back up a bit in Matthew, to the Scripture we read several weeks ago, when we were talking about the angel appearing to Joseph. We were concentrating on the dream, and the information the angel was giving Joseph, and Joseph's obedient response, and we glossed over something else important, that affects the way we read today's passage. So if you still have your Bible open, back up to Matthew, chapter 2, verse 2. The wise men go to King Herod and ask the whereabouts of the child that has been born King of the Jews. Verse 3 is King Herod's reaction. Before he says anything sneaky, before he tries to manipulate the wise men, Matthew tells us, King Herod is frightened. He's afraid, because he is supposed to be the ruler in these parts. He's afraid, because he knows these wise men wouldn't have shown up making this request without some divine message. He's afraid because his power is threatened.

And then listen to the end of that verse. King Herod was frightened, *and all Jerusalem with him*. Herod's fear is contagious, because fear just is catching. But there's more to it than that. When the powerful are afraid, they act out, and their actions always fall most heavily on those who are most vulnerable. All Jerusalem was already being ruled by the Roman Empire, with Herod as their puppet. He had a reputation throughout the ancient world, recorded by contemporary historians, as a ruler who was "cruel to all alike and one who easily gave in to anger and was contemptuous of justice."¹ He was egomaniacal and mean and impulsive and unpredictable.

When Herod is afraid, it just aggravates his tendencies. When Herod thinks he needs to protect his power and his turf, he becomes even more cruel, stunningly cruel, and ignores any moral compass he might have had. All Jerusalem is afraid *with* Herod, because they are afraid *of* Herod. Wherever he directs his anger and cruelty, it will be the most vulnerable who suffer.

Herod puts his plan in motion almost right away. He first has to figure out exactly where the child is to be born, so he ascertains that information from the wise men. The wise men go and worship and pay homage to Jesus and offer him the gifts. They themselves receive a warning in a dream against falling in with Herod's plan, so they go home "by another road."

Herod is thwarted temporarily, as he doesn't know which baby it is who threatens his power, so he doesn't know which baby to kill. Meanwhile, Joseph receives another visit from the angel in his dream, and he and Mary and the child leave to find sanctuary in Egypt.

Herod realizes that the wise men have not fallen in with his manipulation, and he is "infuriated," Matthew says. His power is still threatened. He is afraid and angry, and he gives an order that is

¹ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 17.191, cited in *Jewish Annotated New Testament*, pg. 720.

breathhtaking in its horror. He orders that all children in and around Bethlehem, two years and younger, be killed. Because he is scared and mad, children die and families are forever broken.

After Herod dies, which is a few more years, Joseph again receives a couple of messages via his dreams and the family comes to settle down in Nazareth. But the fear that the powerful are at risk, that the status quo is threatened, that this child represents a new way of ordering the world—that fear never goes away. And that fear eventually hangs Jesus on the cross.

Threatened power leads to fear leads to rulers acting out in ways that hurt the vulnerable and defenseless. We may not have much power to protect, but that same fear rises in us, when our comfortable ways are threatened, when our place in the world feels at risk, when someone wants something that is ours and that we believe is in scarce supply. We can easily stir up that fear in others, too. And we can easily act out like Herod does, hurting those around us who can least sustain the injury. It's important to be aware of that.

It's even more important to know how to stop our fears from hurting someone else. We spent all of Advent hearing from God's messengers the angels. And if there's one thing we learned, it's that angels' opening line is always, always, "Do not be afraid."

We can manage that, or at least manage to keep our fear from acting out in cruelty and anger, only with God's help and in God's assurance that this scary thing is not the most important thing, or not the last thing, or not the ultimate thing. Through this time and experience that was legitimately and understandably frightening for Mary and Joseph and the baby, even for the wise men, they trusted in God's guidance and obeyed God's command. God's promises were trustworthy. We too, can halt our fear in its tracks, by turning it to trust and obedience. We may have to say, "God, I have no idea how you're going to fix this, and I am afraid, but I'll do as you say." And it may take longer than we want.

"Do not be afraid" is not just for angels to say to unsuspecting parents-to-be. Do not be afraid is for us. And for Herod. And for rulers. And for anyone whose fear turns against their neighbors. And for us. And, in case we miss it, "do not be afraid," is for us.