

**The Epiphany of the Lord**  
**Sunday, January 4, 2018, Year B**  
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“When a strong man, fully armed, guards his palace his possessions are undisturbed. But when one stronger than he attacks and overcomes him, he takes away the armor on which he relied and distributes the spoils.” (Lk. 11:21-22)

Jesus said that. He had been driving evil spirits out of afflicted people and his critics accused him of casting out demons by the power of the prince of demons. That context helps us understand the saying. The strong man fully armed is Satan. His palace is this world. His possessions are all those who are caught in the snares of sin and death, the human race estranged from God. The one stronger is Jesus himself. He has come into the world to attack Satan, overcome and bind him, and free the captives.

This is an exciting metaphor-- Jesus on offense-- and it explains a few things. Like another saying that the gates of hell shall not prevail against the Church. The Church is on offense, attacking the gates of hell, breaking into Satan's palace to free those he holds prisoner. The Church will prevail because Christ will prevail in freeing mankind from its spiritual chains.

The saying also explains King Herod. There is a natural human way of explaining Herod. Like all tyrants he was unpopular, and knew it, and so was constantly vigilant for challenges to his rule. He excelled at the crafty game of staying on top and did not hesitate to use violence. During the course of his career ten members of his own extended family were executed on suspicion of conspiracy.

But there's also a supernatural way of explaining Herod. People like him, caught in their own natural passions and vices, are used by the evil one, his willing tools, like prisoners who for some slight preferment collaborate with the guards against their fellow prisoners. Herod probably did not see himself as a prisoner. He thought he was master and that the kingdom was his. When the magi arrived from the east seeking the new-born king of the Jews, Herod responded according to the instinct for power he always obeyed. Intrigue, deception, and violence had always worked for him, except that it kept digging him deeper into the same hole of kill or be killed. People like that reach a point where they can't think of any other option. Herod was a collaborator in his own captivity. Christ had come to attack Satan's palace and liberate him, but he did not want to be freed. Politically astute but spiritually obtuse. There are many like him.

We don't know near as much about the magi, at least as individuals. The Bible doesn't say there were three of them, only that there were three gifts. We don't know their names, but

Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar have become traditional. They came from east of Judea, magi was a Persian word for a wise man, a sage, and these magi seem to have been astrologers. In scanning the heavens for indicators of the future or signs of divine intentions they noticed a particular phenomenon, which they called a star, which indicated the birth of a special king for the Jewish people. Being wise, the magi likely were familiar with the Jews, their monotheistic faith, and their expectation of a messiah.

There has long been much speculation about the star. Was it a star, a comet, or a conjunction of planets? With the use of modern computers, astronomers are able to plot the location of the planets at any given time in history, and there were some planetary conjunctions of the time that fit very well the description in the Bible. Even the stopping over the place where the child lived might be explained by something called retrograde motion, which is when a planet, as viewed from earth, appears to stop and reverse.

Whatever the star was, it was unique enough to motivate a journey to Judea, and the events of that journey showed the differences between the magi and Herod, between wisdom and mere cunning.

The magi, like many people doing scholarly research or intelligence work, valued the information itself, sought what was really true not what they wish was true, had great respect for their sources, even reverence when the source inspired it, as seems to be the case with our magi. Herod, like many political leaders, was mainly interested in how the information might be useful to him.

The magi did not yet know the true God, but they were seeking Him as best they knew how. Herod had no use for divinities that did not serve his purposes.

The magi were like the many pagans in the world at the time who had grown disenchanted with their mythical gods and goddesses. They recognized that mankind was prone to self-destructive vices but also capable of great virtue. When a divine liberator was at the gates signaling his presence, they were ready to throw open the gates in welcome. Herod could only think to slam the gates shut again and if possible destroy the liberator.

Herod was politically astute but spiritually obtuse. The magi might have been a little naïve politically, but they were spiritually very astute. It's the difference between wisdom and cunning.

The world today is full of Herods resisting God and full of magi seeking Him, which means that Christ has many enemies but also many potential allies who need only a sure sign from us that God is real, Christ can change their life, and his Church is a reliable teacher of truth.

Give that sure sign by living the gospel in your own life.  
Press the attack of truth on the lies and empty promises of the evil one.  
Be ready to welcome those who are escaping through gaps in their prison walls, staggering toward the light.