

Epiphany (January 7)

If not for the dream, they would have gone back to Herod.
If they had not been shown something,
they would have returned to the palace with their report,
with directions to the place where he lay.
If not for the dream, they would have inadvertently joined Herod in the attack
on the holy one,
in resistance to the holy purposes of God.
If not for the dream.

This is one of those stories we know too well,
and thus the drama and danger are eliminated.
We know how it turns out;
we need to remember how it might have turned out.
For there is great duplicity; dissembling; lying evident in Herod.
A perfect villain.
And violence is just under every word.
You might think it a sweet story,
if you have only the elements of a romantic nativity scene in mind.
Fearful, angry, bloodthirsty Herod is not in that scene,
though he lingers in consciousness if you know the story.
The wise men's presence at Bethlehem was framed by their initial interview
with Herod
and his presumption that they would return to him with useful intelligence.
Matthew tells us that they met with him in secret, where of course dark plots
are hatched,
where things that cannot be contemplated in the light might be planned.
He sought to make them his spies,
spies who would be followed by assassins.
But they were warned in a dream and took a different road
and the purposes of God played out in the life of Jesus.

So what do you know that has made all the difference?
What was revealed to you, what was shown to you, that changed everything?
We all come into this world as the wise men arrived in Jerusalem,
intrigued by bright and shiny things,
hungry for something novel and powerful,
ready to charge ahead.
And then we realize there are others, and they matter,
and some have influence over us.

They want things we might want, too.
And so we compete against each other or collaborate in our striving.
And we make many idols and may do much violence,
unless something is revealed.
Unless we are shown a different way, unless some wisdom finds us,
unless we dream.

That is a large part of the work of the church,
to make an intervention, to shape minds and lives,
to give people a different vision,
one centered on God's work in Christ and the Kingdom he is bringing in.
Maybe we work on the conscious more than the unconscious
but surely we mean to be God's agents for the sharing of a dream,
the dream of a Kingdom,
by which we are turned around,
and led down a different road than the one we would naturally take.

When next you look at a nativity scene,
with its warm tones, its stylized beauty, its perfect moment,
frozen in time, quality,
Stop for a moment and remember the choice before those three men from the
East.
Would they be Herod's accomplices or God's servants?
Would they merely live or would they join God's dream?
Your life, as ordinary, as repetitive as it may seem on a January day,
is charged with the same drama.

That is the great drama in all our lives.
Will we take our cues from the natural man, from the voice like Herod's,
that is within and nearby, saying,
"Oh, I know you. We are much alike.
Let's get what we can, for that is all there is."

Or, will we be wonderfully different and perfectly ourselves,
by living in Christ and with God,
as fully as we can?
Will we be given a dream and dream it together?