

## Arise, Shine!

Threat and promise. That is what we receive in the gift of the Christ child. And though in the western church we have relegated them to a cameo appearance in our annual Christmas pageants, the wise men from the East have a far larger role to play.

As they encounter Herod, these journeying magi discover that good news has enemies.

The arrival of these men in Jerusalem and their excited inquiry into the birth of the new king of the Jews releases Herod's deepest fears and his response is swift and dark.

This coming Sunday, we hear the horrible story of how after the wise men decide to go home by another way and not tell Herod where they found the baby Jesus, we learn, as I mentioned last week, that Herod sends word to kill all of the children in and around Bethlehem who were under two years of age.

"What's the world coming to?"

I seem to hear that question more and more. What is the world coming to? Fearfulness seems to be the order of the day. Amid the world's woes we see our country rise to the highest in mass shootings anywhere in the world...the world. And, hate crimes are on the rise, empowered by rhetoric from high places. History repeats and repeats.

It is tempting to give in to despair or anger. It is tempting for us to shake our heads and proclaim that the world is simply lost and God forsaken or we may even wonder if God exists at all. Things fall apart. People can seem so selfish, so corrupt, and so cynical.

There is just too much pain and sorrow and sometimes it just feels easier to collude with the corruption than to attempt to shine any light into its darkness. The Herods of the world seem to have it all their way—no matter that they lack integrity, bow to hatred, and kill the innocent. It can be tempting to fall into this kind of thinking because there is truth in it. That thick darkness that Isaiah speaks of is always a threat.

The challenge for us in this modern age is that the edges between darkness and light have become very, very vague—as Rohr says, "When nothing is forbidden, nothing is required." This is the social ill which Thomas Merton described as "organized despair."

Yes, as these wise men discovered in their encounter with Herod, the world can feel clogged with evil and woe, but that is not the entire story.

If we only see the world as broken and irredeemable, then we will fail to see that bright light that has come into the world and we will miss our opportunity and responsibility to help shine that light into dark places.

The joyful and expectant quest of these men from the East remind us that even in the midst of the Herods of the world grabbing all the headlines; God's mercy and light can guide us to hope and truth.

On May 22, 1992, at 4 p.m., a bakery in Sarajevo was distributing bread to the starving people of the war shattered city. With no warning a shell fell directly in the middle of the line, killing 22 people and wounding many others. Not far away lived a musician named Vedran Smailovic. Before the war, he had been the principal cellist of the Sarajevo Opera.

When he saw the carnage around him, he decided to take action and resolved to do the thing that he could do best. Every day thereafter, at 4 p.m. precisely, he would put on his full formal concert attire, take up his cello, place a little camp stool in the middle of the crater the shell had made, and play a concert. Even after his cello was smashed in a confrontation with soldiers, he continued to play on borrowed instruments.

Smailovic is a good example of not being conformed, shaped, or wearied by the darkness of this world.

Whenever we want inspiration in the midst of cynicism attempting to take hold of us, I want us to remember Smailovic; he knew how to arise and shine in the midst of deep darkness.

Think of him in the bombed-out city, fully dressed and coifed, playing beautiful music, anyway. He could have done what many of us might have done in the face of such waste: he could have lost hope in beautiful things like music.

Instead of giving into despair, he conformed himself to beauty. He did not allow the ugliness around him to swallow him up.

Yes, darkness is real and pervasive. Prophets, priests, psalmists, even Jesus never make any explanation of the existence of evil, but all of them speak of God's desire to equip us with the courage to resist and deny evil's power.

Herod is afraid because he knows that you cannot kill the truth. Once the strong Word of God's truth, justice and love have been spoken, and have been given life by the voices of all of those who refuse to call darkness light, it will not die. It echoes and rings and continues to vibrate throughout the world.

This child whom these men travel so far to see grew to call us to a place of conviction and courage; he taught us to place faith and trust in God's promises.

His life reminds us that no matter how dark, corrupt and foolish the times may seem, God continually calls us to enact and claim beauty and truth...to fight for justice and mercy.

For wherever we shine the light of God's justice, truth, beauty and love, it continues to live, bring hope, give life, and transform the world.

Darkness and light cannot live together so arise shine; for your light has come, lift up your eyes and look around because the glory of the Lord has risen upon you!

Happy Epiphany, Stephanie+