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1/3/21, Matthew 2:1-12

“Finding Goodness”

After naming the trials of the past year: a global pandemic, racial strife, the impeachment of President Trump and a divisive election, the Washington Post did something interesting. In December, the paper asked its readers to sum up the year 2020 in one word or phrase.

“Dumpster fire” was the sixth most common word or phrase. “Nightmare” came in at number 11, while “relentless” took the number 10 spot. The top 3 are as follows. Number 3 was “chaotic” for obvious reasons. Number two was “lost.” Many thought we have lost our way as a country.

The number one word over 2,000 respondents used to describe 2020 was “exhausting.” That sounded about right to me. The pandemic makes meeting all the demands of life that much harder. So many are just barely holding on until life gets back to some semblance of normal.

I was reflecting on all this as I was reading the Epiphany story this year. I didn’t have any earth-shattering insights or come up with any magical words of wisdom to make everything okay, but something in the reading jumped out at me. I never really noticed it before.

Our reading begins with the words, “In the time of King Herod...” King Herod was awful. We might say he was the 2020 of historical world rulers. Known as Herod the Great, he ruled in Judea from 40 BC to 4 AD. Ethnically, he was an Arab, but his ancestors converted to Judaism and he was raised Jewish. During the Roman occupation of Judea, Herod played a significant role.

He rose to power primarily because his father enjoyed a friendly relationship with Julius Caesar and because he was so willing to aid the Romans in occupying Jewish territory. For his compliance, he was granted the honorary title King of the Jews by the Roman Senate.

Here’s the thing about Herod. There’s broad agreement among historians that he struggled with depression and severe paranoia. He became obsessed with fear of losing his position and conducted a reign of terror against even his own family, whom he

regarded as rivals. He banished a wife and child for political gain. He killed his brother-in-law for conspiracy. He accused two of his sons of high treason. They were both found guilty and executed.

Herod wasn't popular with anyone. The historian Josephus stated that Herod was so concerned that no one would mourn his death, that he commanded a large group of revered men to come to Jericho, and he gave an order that they were to be killed at the time of his death so that the displays of grief that he craved would take place. Fortunately, those wishes were not carried out.

Matthew describes this amazing thing that takes place "In the time of King Herod," during what had to be a chaotic and exhausting reign. Jesus was born. The divine became one of us. The juxtaposition between Jesus and Herod could not be more stark. Herod had enormous authority. He had the backing of the Roman Empire. He lived in palaces. He had heavily armed soldiers at his command. He could have people executed on a whim, even members of his own family.

On the other hand, Jesus was born, not in the great city of Jerusalem, the center of religious and political life, but in the little town of Bethlehem. Jesus was born to an unmarried teenager. Mary and Joseph were of no significance. He was born in a stable and laid in a feeding trough, because there was no room for them.

The Wise Men came from a foreign land looking for Jesus. They knew that God was up to something somewhere. They understood that there was more to this world than the awfulness of people like Herod. They trusted that if they committed themselves to the search, they would find the one who was full of goodness, the one who would usher in a realm of peace and justice and compassion and mercy.

As I reflected on this, I got to thinking that the reason I love the story of Jesus' birth so much is that God operated in such an unexpected way. The Herods of the world demand our attention and our loyalty, but most of us are looking for something different. Our hearts are somewhere else. The shepherds left their flocks and went to Bethlehem. The Wise Men didn't even look for the Messiah in Herod's household or among his cronies. They actually avoided Herod and returned home "by another way."

Leadership consultants talk about two kinds of authority. There's formal authority that comes from having a certain status or holding a position of power. Then, there's what

they call moral authority. Moral authority comes from being guided by certain values and principles. Herod had formal authority, but Jesus had moral authority.

I remember the moment I learned the difference between the two. When I began my ordination process, I had to get the support of the church in which I was a member. That meant I had to go to the annual church meeting and talk about my faith and my call to ministry. Since, my dad was a church pastor all his life, I talked about watching my dad operate in the church and what I learned about ministry from him.

When the meeting ended, people began folding up the chairs. An older woman in the church came up to me. She said, "Eric, I remember hearing about your mom." My mom died of cancer a number of years previous to this. She had done some work with churches in the association, doing some education around world hunger and other things.

She said, "Your mom made quite an impact on people. I'll bet she influenced you to pursue ordained ministry as well." She was absolutely right. I realized I was focused on my dad, because he was always front and center. I wasn't adequately taking into account how influential my mom had been in her quiet, unassuming way.

My mom had no advanced degrees. She had no title attached to her name. She was rarely, if ever, the center of attention, but she had an enormous impact on the people around her (including me), because she was such a loving and giving person. She lived out her values in ways that inspired others.

As we begin the year 2021, I realize, as awful as things can get, there is goodness all around. Maybe we just need to be committed to seeking the goodness in unexpected places. We have to deal with the Herods of this world, but for every Herod in Jerusalem, there is a Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem.

Think about who are the heroes in your life? Maybe it's someone who takes center stage, but maybe it's the relative who always takes care of things behind the scenes. Maybe it's the person on the margins of all the activity who goes around doing good without ever calling attention to it.

I'm not big on New Year's resolutions, but I've been a little inspired by that Washington Post article. In addition to asking people to describe 2020 in one word, they asked people what are you hopeful for in 2021? One person said, "Resolution. To the virus,

to our political system, to the era of abject hate. And a sense of optimism — I'm really looking forward to relaxing my shoulders again."

A 15-year-old responded, "Being in quarantine has made me realize how much I miss school, hanging out with my friends, dancing, etc."

Another person said, "I'm hoping to finally exhale."

I resolve to relax my shoulders in 2021, to dance, to finally exhale. Like the Wise Men so long ago, I believe there is something holier than Herod. There is goodness all around. I'm going to seek the goodness. I'm going to welcome it wherever and in whomever I find it. I'm going to trust the goodness I find will be enough to keep me going.