

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, January 6, 2008
Rev. John Tapscott

“WHO’S IN CHARGE HERE?”

Matthew 2:13-15

It’s after Christmas and Lucy in a Peanuts cartoon mutters, “Rats! Phooey! Everything is hopeless! Who cares?” Charlie Brown says, “Lucy, what in the world is the matter with you?” Again she shouts, “Rats! Phooey!” The last panel shows her walking away and saying to the puzzled Charlie Brown. “Of course, you realize that I’m just experiencing my regular, post-Christmas letdown.”

I hope it’s not been that bad for any of us, and I hope you had a good Christmas celebration with some peace and joy mixed in. But it’s true that Christmas soon gives way to the reality of the world. Credit card bills soon fill our mailbox. There are at least two more months of winter ahead of us. Sneaky deadlines often creep up on us this time of year. Students are soon writing exams. The peace and hope of Christmas soon gives way to headlines about assassinations and murders and rising gas prices and all the rest.

Now if you could sum up the reaction of the wise men, the shepherds and Mary and Joseph to the new born king, it would be that of wonder and joy. But the wonder and joy of Jesus’ birth soon gave way to another reality. For there is another king in this story who said he wanted to worship Jesus. But in reality Herod, the King of Judea, wanted to kill Jesus and just days after his birth sent soldiers to do that. But we know that Herod’s purpose failed and God’s purpose prevailed. Even in the face of deadly opposition, God’s plan was fulfilled. God’s purposes prevail!

Now Herod’s presence grounds the birth of Christ in the reality of the world. God sent Christ to be King and Saviour of all, and the wise men worshipped Him and presented him with gifts fit for a king. But as soon as he arrived, Herod wanted to destroy him. So we are reminded of the great clash that is taking place in the world. It is the clash of Caesar and Christ; darkness and light; evil and good; sin and righteousness. It is the clash between loveless power represented by Herod and powerless love represented by the infant Christ. It is the clash between Herod’s Kingdom and God’s Kingdom. To sum it up, it is the clash between the world opposed to God’s purposes and the world attuned to God’s purposes.

The results of this clash are seen everyday. We see it in the contrast between the things we hope for and the disappointments we experience; in the promise and joy of marriage on one

hand, and the many broken homes and marriages that are all around us; in the beauty of God's creation and the human bent to exploit and damage it. We see it in poverty existing side-by-side with great wealth, in the desire for peace constantly being undermined by war and terrorism. We see it in the growth of the church on the one hand, and the persecution of God's people on the other, in the Gospel of Christ spreading around the globe, and the simultaneous growth of atheism and popularity of those who are against God.

And this clash of competing Kingdoms even happens within us. There are times when we worship Christ and claim Him as Lord, but other times we resist his Lordship and keep him at arms length. "Trust in the Lord with all your heart," says Proverbs, "and lean not on your own insight." But we don't always trust in the Lord. There is a constant battle in us between the desire to do God's will and the desire to go our own way, relying on our own strength and insight.

This clash of competing impulses was seen even in Herod. The Jewish King Herod was a puppet of the Roman rulers, but he really wanted to be liked by the Jewish people. He financed huge building projects which provided work and gain for many. He was building a Temple in Jerusalem even more grand than Solomon's temple. But there was an insane streak of jealousy in Herod which brooked no rivals and led him down a murderous path. Yes, there is a clash between the purposes of the world opposed to God and the world attuned to God. Sometimes we feel that clash even within ourselves. And the outcome doesn't always seem certain. The wrong seems oft so strong and it doesn't always seem that God's purposes will prevail. But look back to the story.

When Herod saw he was tricked by the wise men, he became furious. He ordered the killing of all the tiny male children in Bethlehem. Some have said this couldn't have happened. But Herod had already killed countless people, including three of his sons and one wife. People said it was safer to be Herod's pig than to be his son. To Herod the killing of two dozen babies in tiny Bethlehem was a small thing. It was dreadful for families who lost their infants, of course, and shows just how terrible the forces opposed to God can be. And if Jesus been among those killed, God's plan to save the world would have ended right there. God couldn't allow that to happen, so "an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt." And Joseph, obedient as always, rose and took the family by night and left for Egypt, where they stayed until Herod died. (Matthew 2, 13,14)

God has his ways. Herod sent soldiers with swords to Bethlehem, but God quietly sent an angel first. Throughout Scripture, we see that God finally has his way in spite of the powers that are against Him. The Herods may oppose God's purposes, but God's purposes prevail. It is not Herod, but God who is in charge here!

Now this was not only attack on Jesus' life. In fact, it once seemed that the religious and political powers finally got him. One Passover in Jerusalem Jesus was put through a sham trial and sent to his death on a old rugged cross as a paid-for crowd yelled, "Crucify Him!" No one was worshipping him on that day. The crown he wore was a crown of thorns. Even God seemed absent as Jesus cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" But once again God had his ways. And his way was not to rescue his son from the Cross. Rather, his way was to raise up Jesus from the grave with power on Easter Sunday morning to live forevermore as Lord and King. Once again, God's purposes prevailed. For God's plan all along was to provide rescue for us and the whole world from the power of sin and death through Christ's own death and resurrection. Not even the power of death itself can destroy God's purposes for us or for the world. Those babies who were killed in Bethlehem were not lost to the eternal care of God. Indeed, their lives would be fulfilled in the heavenly Kingdom where all God's redeemed people will be brought together again. Herods come and go, but God has all eternity to fulfill his plan for us and for his creation.

Yes, there is a clash between the world opposed to God's purposes and the world attuned to God's purposes. But God's purposes prevail. And every so often we see signs which remind us of this truth.

U. S. Senator John McCain who is seeking the Presidential nomination tells this story on the campaign trail when he is asked about his faith. It happened when he was a prisoner of war in Vietnam. In the prison camp McCain was forced to kneel for hours at a time, his arms tied behind him. But a certain guard who as he began his shift, would always approach McCain, put his finger to his lips to signal silence, then loosen the ropes. As his shift ended he would tighten them again. Weeks later, when McCain was allowed to stand outside in the sunshine on Christmas Day, the same guard approached him, stood silently and drew a cross in the dirt with his sandal. He then erased it and walked away. "I'll never forget that individual," McCain says. "He not only helped to shape my faith, but even to save my life." God's purposes prevail and will one day embrace the whole creation. God's purposes cannot be stopped.

I read recently that according to the United Nations, about 20 percent of the world's population now live in grinding poverty. That sounds high, except that in 1990, it stood at 32%. Economic development and a greater sharing of the world's resources accounts for much of the improvement and its even starting to be seen in parts of Africa. Jesus was born in Bethlehem, "the house of Bread," as a sign that He is the Bread of life for our souls, and as a sign that God wants all people to share in the bounty of God's world. God wants this world to be a "house of Bread" for all. And we see it happening. Is it human work? Is it God's work? Christians would say it's both. God won't do it without us and we can't do it on our own without God. So we are encouraged and empowered by God to be part of his

Kingdom's work.

God's purposes prevail! God is in charge here! That's the message we proclaim this Epiphany season. Do you remember how the wise men were warned in a dream to go home by another way? Well, that is what we do. Though we are in the world, we do not follow the way of the world opposed to God's purposes. We walk another way, the way of God, the way of Christ, the way of sacrificial love. Yes, we see the world against God, the world where Herod seems to sit upon the throne. But we do not despair. For we see God in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. We see the light that shines in the darkness and cannot be extinguished. We know that God's purposes prevail. We know who is in charge here. We know that God will fulfill all his promises for his world, for his church, for us who come to God through faith in His Son. The Herods pass away, but Jesus Christ lives forever as King, the One before whom every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that he is Lord.

As we receive the sacrament today, let us recommit ourselves to Jesus Christ as King and Lord. Let us be very conscious this year of growing in Christ and walking in his way. May the Holy Spirit open God's word to us and lead us in the paths of righteousness.