

Epiphany, Year B 2021
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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As I watched the news on Wednesday, along with many of you I'm sure, I was increasingly shocked as, hour by hour, images came of Americans, many armed, storming the Capitol building in Washington, D.C. After I began to wrap my mind around the idea that some of my countrymen and women had seen fit to disrupt what in other years has been a pro forma part of the peaceful transition of power, I noticed something from the newscasters throughout the day: they used the word 'sacred' over and over to describe what was happening at the joint session of Congress. I think they used the word sacred as a way to draw a distinction between the Constitutional ritual that had been interrupted and the seditionist riots happening outside. The opposite of sacred is, of course, profane. So, in the story that the newscasters were telling, what happened ceremonially inside the walls of power was holy just as the riot was infernal.

I think Christian people have to be incredibly careful thinking that what we cobble together in terms of government is holy, even on its best day. I think at its finest, government can be inspiring, creative, equitable, just, egalitarian, and even righteous. But I don't think it can ever be sacred. There are many spirits, but only one is Holy, as an old professor of mine was quick to point out.

And so, I would like to put forward the perhaps difficult to swallow notion that the people making speeches inside the Capitol and the people toting guns outside the Capitol have more in common than it would be seen by watching the news. I think they were all looking for something. Saying this, by the way, is not searching for some kind of moral equivalency. The people who stormed the Capitol on Wednesday were idiotic, reckless, misled, violent, wicked, and breathtakingly stupid. I suppose I just wonder if that couldn't be said about most humans at one time or another in their lives. I think most people on the planet are natural seekers, and I think the rioters were looking for something. They just looked in the wrong place.

The Herods of the world can be pretty convincing. Think about the Gospel this morning. Herod had convinced wise men — magicians, astrologers — to share with him the location of the baby Jesus. And they did it. I have a hunch they didn't realize just how wicked Herod was. That realization came later. The text says that the wise men were warned in a dream to return home by a different road — in other words, to turn away from Herod. So, you might read the story to say that even the wise men lost their path for a little while. They landed in the court of Herod when they were really hoping to find Jesus in Bethlehem. They got to the manger eventually. And I suppose my faith tells me that we can all get to the manger eventually — even the most corrupt politician, even the most rabid fringe fanatic. The Gospel of Jesus is available to everyone, even those who are misled by tin pot Herods. In his ministry, Jesus over and over again seeks out the most grievous sinners — the tax collector stealing Jewish money to send to Rome, the Imperial Centurion who should know better than to wage a life of war on the weak — and offers them healing. That is why the star stopped over Bethlehem. Its light illuminated the birth of the prince of peace rather than the prince of Jerusalem.

I know I might be on shaky ground here, but I think that our faith is telling us to look at that idiot in his buffalo horns and red, white, and blue face paint and see a child of God who is seeking something. It doesn't mean he didn't get lost. It doesn't mean that there are not consequences — even severe ones — for his actions. But I do not believe the faith we practice invites us to decide that he is a demon or somehow evil, just as I believe the faith we practice should make us leery of calling what happens in a legislative chamber — however noble — holy. Do not confuse the power of the world with the power of God. We go to the manger; we don't go to Herod.

So, on this Epiphany, I want us to pray for our enemies. I want us to ask God that we might see them the way that Jesus does. By all means, fight for a more equitable society — for police reform, against rural poverty, that every student regardless of financial status or skin color may have access to education and opportunity in our nation — but be wary. Not all Herods are bloviating mini-autocrats with nuclear codes and Twitter accounts. Some are more subtle and come in every political stripe imaginable. So spend a little less time on the news and a little more in prayer. Ask God for a spirit of discernment. Worship no princes of this world but rather join the wise ones at the manger to bow down before the only prince that matters — the Prince of Peace, our Lord Jesus. Amen.