

January 3, Epiphany (Matthew 2:1-12)

Epiphany is the ultimate bad-guy story.

by [Heidi Haverkamp](#) in the [December 16, 2020](#) issue

At a family Christmas service years ago, I sat down on the floor at the front of the church, like you do, and read a book with the kids, retelling the story of Jesus' birth according to Luke. We looked at the pictures and talked about what was happening, and a couple of kids asked loud and funny questions, enjoying how the adults in the congregation laughed and smiled at what they said. But one of the smallest boys, in a very quiet voice the other adults couldn't quite hear, sat right in front of the book and asked me the same question, over and over: on each page, he would point to someone and ask me, "Is that a bad guy?"

At first I answered, "No, that's a shepherd," or "No, that's just a person," but after a few pages I had to start ignoring him. The thing is, there aren't really any bad guys in Luke's version of the nativity. Maybe the innkeeper? Augustus Caesar wasn't included in this particular children's book.

In Matthew's version, however, which I can't imagine any church reads on Christmas Eve—at least not in full, much less for the children's sermon—there is one very bad guy: Herod the Great. As you read Matthew 2, he sounds stomach-churningly familiar: a classic tyrant, paranoid, ready to use lies and violence against any threat to his power. The Bible doesn't mention this, but by the time of the birth of Jesus, he'd already killed many people he saw as threats, including his second wife, Mariamne I, and three of his own sons.

The Epiphany is often told or preached as a story about a long journey, or about the light of Christ leading and guiding us, or about God's welcome to gentiles and people of all nations to worship and know Jesus. But this year I can't help but read it as a story about power: the depraved, fearful power of King Herod, what it drives him to do, and what a contrast his power is to the power of Jesus. Jesus is a very different

kind of king.

As a young adult in the 1990s, I didn't believe in evil. Or at least, evil seemed like something that existed somewhere else or that was exaggerated by people who didn't know any better. But gradually, I read more history. I followed world news more carefully. Then, in seminary, I met someone who talked about evil in a way I'd never experienced before. She was a prison chaplain, and she told me that she had developed relationships with many prisoners, finding goodness and intelligence in them despite their brokenness, mental illness, or rage. But there were a few—and one in particular—who, she told me, had shocked her God-is-love sensibilities to shreds. One particular man exuded an energy she found hard to describe, yet he also seemed empty to her, like a vacuum; in any case, she told me that “evil had done its work” on him. She was the first person I'd ever heard talk about evil in this way, as a real force in the world. Most of my liberal Protestant friends and mentors never talked like that.

The longer I live, the more often I see evil overpower good, the strong exploit the weak, and bad guys crowd out the good guys, whether in the present or through the annals of human history. Still, I am not sure I believe that some people are simply the bad guys. Human experience and human brains are complicated. Hurt people hurt people, as the saying goes. But just as I believe Jesus is real, I believe evil is real—even if I'm not quite sure what it is.

And just as power and authority can amplify goodness and mercy, so too they can amplify fear and anger into forces with much broader, more penetrating destruction and harm.

The power of Herod is brutal, reactive, and paranoid. Like my little kiddo in church on Christmas Eve, Herod sees bad guys everywhere he looks. But the power of God is not like that. What if, in fact, God's power is just the opposite? What if the Son of God is, in fact, no match for a son of the gods, whether Caesar or Herod or Thor? Because the power of God is not like the power of superheroes, street fighters, or avenging angels. Instead, according to the Gospels and the letters of Paul, the power of God is subversive, vulnerable, and life-giving. What if the power of God is not a takeover or a massacre but seeking and finding, going home by another way, second chances, and the spreading of good news like seeds, near and far, good news that changes people not from the top down but from the bottom up?

We are living through a time when many people seem to wish that the power of God would be more like the power of Herod. It's a time when many people are looking for bad guys. But when churches or human beings try to wield God's power as though it were a cudgel instead of a handful of seeds, a baby, or a cross, we tend to get things like the Crusades and the Inquisition. The story of the Epiphany—and all of the Christmas story—is the beginning of a long story about how God uses power in Jesus not to overpower us but to dwell among us and love through us.