

Gifts and Threats

Exodus 1: 15-22 Matthew 2: 1-12

The annual Buying season that occurs around the time when Jesus' birth gets celebrated has thankfully come to a close. The Buying season starts earlier every year, it seems, and lasts a solid week after Christmas with deals, big deals, and last chance deals galore. Getting stuff and giving gifts has become a primary activity during the season preceding Jesus' birth, roughly aligned with the church's liturgical season of Advent. The Buying season has mimicked Advent as a season of preparation, but it has a wholly different agenda.

The Buying season is focused on acquiring; it may be acquiring in order to give as a gift, but it's really all about acquiring. At its root, acquiring is totally different from giving, isn't it? Even when you're getting something in order to give it away as a gift, the prerequisite action is acquiring.

The Advent season is a season of preparation with a focus on spiritual awareness and anticipation. In one sense, it's the sacred gift that's coming into the world, the fulfillment of the ancient promise of God. It is met with celebration, adoration, and yes, gift-giving in celebration as our reading from Matthew relates.

But there is another sense: the threat of the intervention of God into the stability and order that the world has established for itself. Stability and order tend to be imposed by and for those who hold power, and therefore God's interference in that stability and order gets recognized as a threat. The powerful react with violence to thwart what God would do.

In the passage from Exodus, the Hebrew midwives are confronted by Pharaoh, the king of Egypt. First, those biblically called "Hebrews" were known throughout the Near East as *hapiru*. The *hapiru* are regarded in most societies as a bunch of no-goods. The *hapiru* are marginal people with no social standing who are disruptive of the "good" people and their society. They're outcasts, typically despised, excluded, and regarded as a threat. They may be, as in Egypt, state slaves. (NIBC) (Note that it isn't until these people, the Hebrews, claim a land for themselves that they become "Israelites.")

The Hebrews have become a threat in Egypt because they have grown in number. Pharaoh, having gained his throne by heredity, not skill, merit, popularity, or apparently brains, decides that a good strategy to deal with this threat would be to kill all of the male Hebrews at birth. This makes no sense whatsoever but utter stupidity has been known to direct government policy far more often than we'd care to admit. Pharaoh goes directly to the source, the two Hebrew midwives. Note that there are only two for the *entire* Hebrew community which according to Pharaoh is multiplying like rabbits. Two?

Anyway, if they would simply kill the male babies, then Pharaoh would be able to restore peace, order, and security for the good people of Egypt, which really means for himself and the powerful elites who support him.

The Hebrew midwives probably realized several things. **One**, Pharaoh was, after all, a stupid *man*: how hard could it be to trick him about “*woman stuff*”? He already seemed rather dim on this subject. And **two**, that there was the whole matter of what God– the true sovereign – expected of them as midwives, recognizing the horrible command to engage in a sort of genocide.

When reports get back to Pharaoh that there are male babies continuing to be born, he summons and interrogates the midwives. The midwives claim, *Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they're vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive*. Apparently Pharaoh accepts this ridiculous excuse. On “*woman stuff*,” they were spot-on: he **is** just another stupid *man* after all.

The Hebrew midwives, acting as special agents of the Kingdom of God, are blessed for their service to God's Kingdom.

Following his policy's failure, Pharaoh tries ordering all male babies be thrown into the Nile. God will subvert that scheme as well, using one of Pharaoh's own daughters to bring a male Hebrew baby into his own household!

The gift of new life, these babies being born to the Hebrews, should be seen as blessings, even for Pharaoh. Ultimately, they represent future workers on the huge building projects. However, it is fear that transforms the blessing into a threat. The fear that the Hebrew slave population had become too big to manage brought about these failed attempts to control it. Fear was the motivator, but God's will triumphed over fear time and again. In the end, we know that his fear led to Pharaoh's undoing, and God's aim to free the people of his covenant and bless them with the gift of new life would be fulfilled in time.

We find that God is relentless in a strategy of subverting fear, pulling out one special agent after another to undermine Pharaoh, including the fugitive prince, Moses. And God employs this strategy in other instances.

Our second reading from Matthew is about the three gift-bearing magi from the east, following the star and seeking the Promised One of God, the ***new King of the Jews***. Coming into Judea, these foreigners head for Jerusalem and start asking around, *Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?* For paranoid King Herod the Great, the utterance that another king is loose in Judea provokes a **total freak out rumor** that races throughout the capital city.

Herod calls together his top religious advisers, demanding to know about the prophecy of the Promised One of God. A passage from Micah is cited. Herod decides to let the magi be the dupes who discover the child. Herod tells them to report back when they've found what they're seeking. It may have seemed clever to use the magi like this, but not a smart strategic move. Herod sends them off to Bethlehem, confident he is once again in control, having subverted the prospective usurper to his throne, even if it is a newborn baby.

The gift of a newborn child is matched by the eagerness of the magi who want to bring their special gifts to celebrate this wondrous and blessed birth. Their generous spirit is unlike the spirit of acquiring with which we're familiar in this season. Any connection between our seasonal silliness and the acts of the magi would be quite spurious. Finally, the magi celebrate the birth of Promised One of God while we really celebrate acquiring and consuming pretty much for its own sake if you can get past the window dressing.

The threat experienced by Herod from this news of a new king, and then projected from Herod seeking to destroy this child, is plainly apparent. Again, his fear – paranoid as it may seem – turns the gift of God into a threat. In Herod's limited understanding and deep insecurity, anything that so much as appeared to challenge his authority needed to be summarily destroyed. The gift from God was seen as no gift for Herod, but a vivid, immediate threat to his continued existence ... from a baby.

Herod's plan fell apart when the magi were given an education in royal Judean paranoia while in Bethlehem. "Warned in a dream," they were tipped off to shut up and sneak back to their home country avoiding Jerusalem. That was also the cue for child and parents to flee to Egypt. With that, Herod's plan to subvert God's plan gets subverted by God. Herod doesn't react well, sending in death squads to kill all male children under 2 years old anywhere near Bethlehem.

While the gift of life is celebrated and adored and protected, the fearful are overcome and overwhelmed, reacting to perceived threats with rather desperate attempts at violence and destruction.

Is it odd that we have the gifts of God, the actions of God, celebrated and praised on the one hand, and then on the other hand, acts of fear and violence from the powerful because God has acted to fulfill God's promise and will? It's a reminder that when God acts, things change. The people who least want things to change are the ones who are most vested in keeping things the way they are. When God acts, things change, and the worldly powerful have good reason to be concerned.

As we remember the Lord's last supper in a moment, sharing in the cup and the loaf, we're reminded of God's great gift to humanity which inspired spiritual pilgrims from the East to sojourn to give thanks, praise, and reflect the preciousness and mystery of the gifts given. It has also inspired the precious gifts of service and witness to the ways of the Kingdom.

But we're also reminded that God doesn't act in an arena without gaining a reaction from those who stand to be affected. Those who have attained and acquired power have learned to maintain power by preserving their interest, and doing so with a willingness to engage in whatever it takes. If that means violence and destruction, then those are the tools that must be employed. God knows that worldly power is not relinquished without a struggle, and typically it is worldly power that stands against God's will for love, peace, and justice.

We celebrate Epiphany, when the Messiah is acknowledged by those in-the-know in the world, and gifts of honor and celebration are presented. But we also celebrate communion, recognizing the threats that God's good actions present. As the gift of life is revealed and known in the season of Epiphany, this same gift is recognized as a threat and inspires fear.

In communion, we celebrate the power of God and God's gift over the powers of the world to bring about new life, even out of death itself. We share in that gift and that promise as we come to the Lord's table. We celebrate the gift, even as we acknowledge the threat it presents. Over all of it stands the cross, the resurrection symbol of new life, the gift of God overcoming and triumphant once and for all.