

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on the Feast of the Holy Family
December 29, 2019

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Some people think the Christmas story ended when the shepherds left the stable and returned to their flocks. Those are the same people who greeted Fr Michael Drea at the door after Christmas Eve Mass and said “See you next year!” But we know the Christmas story did not end with the shepherds. Their place was taken by the Wise Men. We reserve that part of the account of the Nativity for January 6th. The Wise Men unwittingly fueled King Herod’s paranoia and made the Holy Family’s flight into Egypt necessary. And old Herod, madder than a wet hen, killed all the baby boys in Bethlehem, an event we remembered at Mass yesterday.

There are *dark parts* of the Christmas story. And this reminds us of something Saint John’s Gospel told in a different way. “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” (1:5)

The Light, which is Christ, is perpetually hunted by the power of darkness. That is no surprise! There is a certain similarity to the story about Moses in danger as an infant and hidden in the bull rushes. Speaking more broadly, there is an age-old clash between God’s commandments and worldly authority. The Holy Family’s flight into Egypt was the greatest example of the ancient pattern of holiness being hunted by darkness. And we can more easily identify this universal pattern when we know Christ is the *Source of Light*. He is the lightning rod, if you will, and the powers of darkness hunt Him more ruthlessly than they ever did elsewhere. When we focus on the large picture, King Herod is only a small player with a bit part. Herod represents all who hunt the Light with an angry will.

There is, however, *another* group hunting for Christ from the time of His birth. And they also have a prototype since the beginning of time, and are given personal representation in the Gospels. These are the shepherds and the Wise Men, and much later, the Greeks who said to the Apostle Philip, “*Sir, we would see Jesus.*” One of my parishes had a pulpit with a permanent sign on the stand where the priest would put his sermon notes. It reminded him of the people to whom he would be preaching. It quoted those Greeks who said, “*Sir, we would see Jesus.*” You and I join those spiritual ancestors and all who hunger to find communion with our Creator and accept Christ’s invitation to eat His Flesh and drink His Blood, the food and drink of our souls’ salvation. In St Matthew’s Gospel

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remembers our Lord Jesus observing that a vulture is attracted to the carcass of a dead animal. That is not exactly a Christmas theme! But the vultures are not bad guys! They represent the saints and all who find in Jesus Christ the food upon which to grow and become one with Him.

So, then, there are *two kinds of hunters* of Christ. There are those driven by an internal malevolence. And there are those who hunt from the heart. You and I as Christ's disciples are to pursue Him as ruthlessly *as if we were an enemy*, and with all the urgency as if our existence hangs in the balance. *It does*, you know. And when we find the Christ Child something strange and wonderful happens. We discover both the greatest darkness within ourselves, and that this darkness is overcome by the Light that our hearts have sought and found. When our hearts seek and find the Christ Child, *the Child possesses us*.

Hunting for God is the oldest story on earth. There is nothing new about Herod seeking to destroy Jesus. Part of the gospel good news is that Herod died. But the greater part of the good news is that on one blessed day, those who hunted in loving desire found Almighty God, in a Baby asleep on the straw.