

Reflecting on the dreams and schemes of those who first encountered Jesus, writer Dorothy Day said, “In Christ’s life there were always a few who made up for the neglect of the crowd. The shepherds did it; their hurrying to the crib atoned for the people who would flee from Christ. The wise men did it; their journey across the world made up for those who refused to stir one hand’s breadth from the routine of their lives to go to Christ. ... The women at the foot of the cross did it too, making up for the crowd who stood by and sneered.”¹

And then in contrast to these who embraced the vision of the fulness of Christ to come, we have today’s scripture reading, where we see one of the most horrific schemers of all time, King Herod, trying to put an end to Jesus before he even speaks into the dreams of those desperately waiting for a savior.

Matthew tells us that Herod feared the birth of Jesus, seeing it as a threat to his power and plans. As Matthew says, “When Herod heard (that wise men from the East came looking for “the child who has been born king of the Jews” – which by the way, was Herod’s title – when Herod heard about Jesus), “he was frightened ... And so he secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared,” the star that signaled the birth of Jesus Christ, our Savior. “Go and search diligently for the child,” said Herod, “and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.”

Up to this point, Herod seems to be in line with all those eagerly and desperately awaiting Christ’s coming. On the face of it, it’s just what God would want for us all – that we would discover Jesus in our lives, share his call and blessing with others, invite them also to follow Christ, as together we change this world for the better.

Sadly, Herod – like so many others down through the centuries – is not truly interested in having Jesus in his life. He’s afraid of Jesus. Herod is afraid of Jesus because the reign of Christ threatens the reign of Herod. It’s that simple. Wielding power, and scheming to hold it at all costs, even at the cost of missing out on Jesus, withholding him from the world.

That’s Herod. But there are a lot of reasons ordinary people like you and me miss out on having Jesus in their lives, reasons people shy away from being a part of a church like ours. One reason is some people are just too focused on themselves. For them, if church isn’t perfect or just to their liking, they’ll have little if anything to do with it.

¹ Dorothy Day, *By Little and By Little: The Selected Writings of Dorothy Day*. (Knopf, 1983), p. 96.

Others don't think it's worth their time and effort to come to worship and invest themselves in the life of a church. Still others live in denial. They don't want to look at those aspects of their lives that might be running contrary to Jesus' teachings and fly in the face of God's desire for humanity.

No matter what the reason is that someone might shy away from Christ and leave the path of Jesus, two powerful forces are always coming into play at odds with each other – dreams and schemes, the dreams of those who invest their lives in following Jesus and the schemes of those who try to avoid it at all costs, either consciously or unconsciously, actively or passively with disinterest.

We all know folks who have actively left the church and others who have just drifted away, as they've lost touch with the dream or vision that Christ embodies.

Think of the dreams you have for this world, the things you can image taking shape if only more people – all people – would come alongside Jesus, follow him and bring others to do the same.

If this world would give itself over to the reign of Christ there would be no more King Herods to wreak such havoc and cause destruction. We would all live peaceably alongside one another, sharing in the bounty of the Lord. That's God's vision for humanity.

Think of the dreams you have for yourself, the things you imagine taking shape in your life, if you were willing and able to follow Jesus more closely. If we followed Jesus more closely in our lives, there would be less upheaval for us, wouldn't there, less despair and upset; more hope and peace?

By Living into our potential as followers of Christ, our cup would overflow with the bounty of the Lord, and for many of us it does, thanks be to God.

By taking up the work of Bible study and spiritual growth, our churches would be places of inspiration and learning, and to a great extent they are, thanks be to God.

By embracing Christ's spirit, our homes would be places of comfort and peace, and for many of us they are, thanks be to God.

By embarking on the way of Christ, we and all our friends and family would be ambassadors for Christ, sent into the world to build up the kingdom of God, and that we are, when with God's help, we live into Christ's vision for this world.

All of this starts with us following the star of Bethlehem to the place of Christ's birth. The true star of Bethlehem, of course, is the baby Jesus, the hope that he embodies. And the place of Christ's birth is the hearts of men and women, a gift to all the world.

Dorothy Day speaks to the fulness of the gifts when she describes the brought by the wise men. "... They brought gold," says Day, "the king's emblem, (Christ, our true King); ... they offered incense, the symbol of praise, (our praise of God); ... they gave him myrrh, to heal and soothe ..., (recognized Jesus, a balm for all the world). The gifts the wise men brought to Jesus are a symbol of the gifts we bring in service to the Lord.

Our sense of humility is a gift that can overcome self-righteousness when we're forcing our opinions on others. Our sense of justice is a gift that can overcome oppression when we fail to see things from the other side's perspective. Our sense of grace and mercy is a gift that can overcome hardheartedness when we lash out at others.

And our calling as Christians is a gift that can overcome complacency when we fail to step up and do what's right, for the betterment of our lives and our world. When it comes to creating a better world and living more blessed lives, it really is a choice between being a dreamer or a schemer. In a world full of schemers intent on getting their way, what we need is more dreamers committed to embracing and enacting Jesus' way.

As you go forth this week, ask yourself what kind of a world you're living into. Ask yourself, at any moment of the day, if you're being more of a schemer – to get your way – or a dreamer, paving the way for a more peaceful and blessed world, a world Christ is even now bringing into being, through us and through our church.

Amen.