

SERMON TITLE: "Forgiveness: Dealing with Danger"  
SERMON TEXT: Matthew 2:13-23  
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James  
OCCASION: January 3, 2021, at First UMC

### **INTRODUCTION**

By now, most of us have put away our Christmas decorations, hung up our 2021 calendars, and are ready to move forward into the New Year. But, according to the traditional church calendar, we're still in the twelve days of Christmas until January 6<sup>th</sup>. That Day of Epiphany is the traditional day for remembering the wise men who brought their gifts and came to worship Jesus.

The Bible doesn't spell out all the details of the wise men's journey, but we can assume their trip was long and arduous. No doubt, they encountered some complications with the weather, and maybe some wild beasts or roadside bandits. We can guess that they might have had some trouble finding water and food for their camels. Maybe they had to overcome travelers' diarrhea or saddle sores. The Bible story tells us that they had to stop and ask for directions, and we all know how lost a man has to be to do that—right, guys?! Then, after they found their way to Jesus, they were warned in a dream not to return to King Herod, for he was the greatest danger of all.

As I indicated last Sunday, I'm dedicating the first five weeks of this New Year to the topic of forgiveness. As we cross over from one year to the next, this is a good time to let go of old baggage and start fresh. As Christians, we know that the Bible tells us we're supposed to forgive. But forgiveness isn't always easy. There are lots of complications. So, I'm going to be exploring some of those hindrances and challenges in the upcoming weeks. Today, I want to begin with the complicating factor of safety and risk. How should we think about forgiveness when we're dealing with danger?

### **1—ACKNOWLEDGE THAT DANGER EXISTS**

If we want to work on our forgiveness issues, possibly the first thing we need to do is acknowledge that danger exists. Today's scripture reading tells us that it wasn't only the wise men who

faced danger. The Gospel of Matthew, chapter two, tells us that after the wise men left to go back to their foreign lands in the east, the holy family fled west to Egypt. An angel of the Lord had appeared to Joseph in a dream, warning him that King Herod wanted to destroy Jesus. Fortunately, Joseph was successful in moving his family to safety. Unfortunately, many other Bethlehem children were killed at the command of the evil tyrant.

Bible scholars have had trouble finding any historical proof that such a horrible “massacre of the innocents” ever took place under King Herod’s rule. Possibly the historians of the day didn’t think that the death of a dozen or so children in a small town warranted their attention. But there was no doubt that Herod was a violent person. He killed anyone he deemed a threat to his political position—including his wife “Mariamne, her two sons, her brother, her grandfather, and her mother.”<sup>1</sup> In the kingdom of Herod, there was plenty of danger, and, as we know all too well, those who are poor and weak usually suffer worse fates than those who are wealthy and strong. One of my Bible commentaries puts it like this: “It is a cruel world . . . [Even] in our time, thousands of babies have been napalmed, gassed, starved, and shot down by the order or permission of unfeeling governments.”<sup>2</sup>

Danger does exist in our world. Our news is full of it. Just in the past week, we’ve heard of a mass shooting at a bowling alley in Illinois and a bombing in Nashville—not to mention a number of violent acts described in our own Utah and Ogden news. As if human-on-human violence isn’t enough, then, of course, we have COVID-19 which has been threatening our physical, mental, social, and financial health for nearly a year. Now that it’s 2021 and the vaccines are coming, we’d love to think that we’re out of danger, but that isn’t true yet. Yes, there is blessed light at the end of the tunnel. Praise God for that! But we still have to keep up our guard. We still have to watch our social distance and wear our masks. We still have to stay home more than we’d like. We still have to think of ourselves and other people as potential carriers of serious risk.

Whether malicious, reckless, or innocently accidental—danger abounds in our world. I know, we don't like to think about this too much. If we did, we'd be paralyzed, afraid to live our lives. To think about danger too much makes us feel weak and victimized. We feel a loss of control. We have nightmares and very real post-traumatic stress disorders. So we'd rather put danger as far out of our minds as possible. But, truly, if we're having trouble with forgiveness, we might need to give this factor some careful thought. Maybe the instincts of our body are telling us that we're dealing with danger.

## **2—FLEE FROM DANGER**

It's a biblical truth that God asks us, even commands us, to forgive. But God has also created our bodies to flee from danger. God has given us biological, chemical, and neurological responses for a reason. They're designed to protect us and keep us alive. When we're afraid, our bodies and brains kick into survival mode. Our adrenalin starts pumping, our emotional defenses go up, and our bodies prepare for fight or flight. And that's often a good thing. It's a lot easier to forgive a threat if you actually live through it. If you survive unscathed, all the better for forgiveness.

People get themselves into a mixed up mess trying to forgive before they get out of harm's way. Christian people especially fall into this trap. We're taught that we're supposed to be loving and kind and keep the peace. So, we allow ourselves to be hurt over and over again—only to find ourselves seething in anger or cowering in fear. We get ourselves tied up in knots of unforgiveness because what we really need to do is flee from danger. We forget that one of the strongest assets God has given us is the ability to duck and run.

You may notice from today's Bible story that, when the angel told Joseph to pack up his family and flee to Egypt, Joseph didn't stay there and try to forgive Herod for his royal rudeness, kingly corruption, or violent values. Joseph didn't make light of Herod's hostilities or his political power. Joseph didn't worry that Herod's outrage was the holy family's fault or that it was their religious responsibility to renegotiate and renew their relationship with him. Instead, Joseph quickly

acknowledged the very real danger they faced, and Joseph hurriedly transported his family out of harm's way. In verses 20-23, you'll notice that, even when Joseph received another angelic message that the coast was clear to move back to Israel, Joseph still stayed far away from the danger of Herod's son Archelaus in Judea. Joseph took his family to the district of Galilee, to the town of Nazareth, instead.

I'm not saying that we should always run away from our problems. There are lots of times when we have to make other choices, and I'm going to talk about those in upcoming sermons. But today's scripture makes it very clear that sometimes escaping danger *is* the right answer. The definition of forgiveness is not "continuing to hang around a dangerous situation." There's no forgiveness virtue in putting ourselves at risk or keeping ourselves there. Forgiveness is something that happens later, from a position of both actual and perceived safety.

### **CONCLUSION**

In the mid-to-late 1990s, I was the pastor of a United Methodist church in a small town in rural northeastern Colorado. There was a young woman in the congregation named Natalie.<sup>3</sup> Natalie had grown up in that town, and her parents owned a business on Main Street. Natalie graduated at the top of her high school class and married a hometown boy, who also had extensive family in that area. Natalie and her husband lived on a farm about 40 miles from town, and they had two little kids.

One day Natalie confided in me. She told me that her husband was very controlling. He knew the exact minute Natalie got off work in town, and he expected her to arrive home in exactly the number of minutes it took to drive there. One day I had seen Natalie at the grocery store, and she seemed nervous, with no time to chat. Now I understood why. Her husband was at home watching the clock. And she'd be in trouble if she didn't arrive on time. Natalie told me that, one time, when they had an argument, her husband actually slashed the tires on her car, just so Natalie couldn't escape. He

had intimidated her in many other ways, as well. So far, he hadn't left any bruises or broken bones, but she was afraid it was going to happen.

Natalie had put up with this situation so far because she believed in the sanctity of her marriage vows, she wanted to keep her family together for the sake of their two children, and she was afraid of causing a scandal in that small town where everyone knew everyone else's business.

But finally Natalie decided she couldn't stay in that marriage any longer, so she carefully made a plan. Natalie found out where the community safe house was, and made advance arrangements to go there with her two kids. Then she bought a large TV for her husband for Christmas, lulling him into thinking everything was OK between them. Natalie also bought her rancher husband tickets to the Denver Stock Show, an event he was very interested in attending and that would take him a distance away from home for at least eight hours. It was during that window of opportunity that Natalie packed up her kids and their needed items and fled to the safe house.

After her husband returned from Denver and found out that Natalie and the children were gone, he called me, the family's pastor. The wrath I experienced over the phone was scary enough to confirm in my mind that Natalie had been living in absolute terror. As a devout Christian woman, she had tried and tried to make her husband happy, to keep peace, and to forgive him for his hurtful ways. But finally Natalie realized that forgiveness wasn't the primary issue. Survival had to come first.

In the coming weeks, I'm going to preach four more sermons on the subject of forgiveness. But I need to make sure you hear what I'm saying today. The only way you can forgive is to be alive and well enough to do it. Forgiveness comes from a place and time of safety. As important as it is to forgive, forgiveness is secondary when it comes to dealing with danger.

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.britannica.com/biography/Herod-king-of-Judaea>

<sup>2</sup>M. Eugene Boring, *The Gospel of Matthew: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections*, in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. VIII, (Abingdon Press: Nashville, 1995), p. 148.

<sup>3</sup>I've changed her name to protect her identity.