

The Christmas we've just celebrated was, in a way, the first for my two-year-old son, Emmett. He clearly engaged with it this year. Spent hours at the creche, moving the figures around, Mary and Joseph petting the animals and making small talk while they waited. We read the story and Emmett asked lots of questions—there are always lots of questions right now—Why the shepherds afraid of the angel? Where baby Jesus? (Briget tried to answer this by explaining that he was in Mary's tummy just like Emmett had been in her tummy, which led Emmett to the logical follow-up question: "You ride on donkey?") And, of course, there was the music. I wish I could say that his first real foray into Christmas music helped to build a solid theological foundation. Alas, the three songs he fell in love with were "Rudolph," "Jingle Bells," and—his favorite—"The Little Drummer Boy."

Now, you might be thinking, that's not fair, "The Little Drummer Boy" has some good theology in it. And that's true. The song reminds us that if we don't have expensive gifts, like gold and frankincense and myrrh, God will take whatever we do have—even a little drum song so simple that a two-year-old can memorize it and no one who has heard it twice will ever be able to forget it. There is a small problem, though. It's really not a Christmas song. It's an Epiphany song. The lyrics say, "Come they told me... A new born king to see... Our finest gifts we bring... To lay before the king..." But the wise men, the magi, are not going to see a new born king. They're going to see a toddler king. We know this from the dreadful massacre that follows their visit. Herod, based on what he had learned from the wise men, kills all the children in and around Bethlehem two years of age and younger.

As a parent of a toddler myself, it's fascinating to imagine Jesus as a two-year-old. Emmett behaves as if he had all authority in heaven and on earth; Jesus actually did.

When Emmett isn't doing what I want him to, which is a lot of the time, and when I haven't lost my sense of humor, which isn't as much of the time, I'll take a breath and thank God. Thank God for teaching me through this maddening, lovely little person that my authority is far from absolute. The power of my will is as nothing compared to my two-year-old son, let alone compared to God. I wish I could honestly say that this revelation sent me regularly into rapturous worship, like the wise men, kneeling at the feet of the toddler Christ, offering him everything they have. More often, it leaves me like Herod, seeing red, filled with rage. It's a terrible, helpless feeling—to be simultaneously overpowered by a small child and my own emotions.

As if perhaps to help me prepare for this sermon, Emmett has had an especially willful week. On Tuesday night he woke repeatedly during the night, inconsolable, screaming, tearing off his pajamas, throwing himself on the floor, demanding that we snuggle him, get him a tissue, get him water. Nothing helped—as soon as we started doing what he wanted it was all wrong—no, OTHER tissue! If we weren't doing what he wanted, it was worse. It might have been the most powerless I've ever felt. Until Wednesday night. Wednesday night he never fell back to sleep. Somewhere around 4:00 in the morning, the three of us were standing in the hallway, Briget holding Emmett, who somehow still had energy left to scream. And I finally just gave in. Not to Emmett, but to reality. This is where we are—standing in our hallway, totally exhausted, with our screaming child. This is what it is. I can't make it something else.

I didn't think it in those words, of course. I just felt it. And suddenly I saw Emmett in Briget's arms. No longer my enemy, no longer the obstacle between me and sleep, but

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a small child. Screaming, yes, but clinging to his mother for dear life. It struck me why toddlers are so willful. They are realizing for the first time how terribly powerless they are.

Today's Gospel is a study in this realization. A child has been born king of the Jews. There are two responses to this new authority. The magi come and kneel at his feet, worship him, and offer gifts. Herod plans to kill the child. If we cannot abide powerlessness, we cannot worship Christ. Herod speaks the language of worship—"When you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage"—but in his heart, he is king.

The question for us this morning is who am I? The magi or Herod? I'd like to say I'm one of the magi, after all, here I am in church, worshipping. But the honest answer is probably both. I can submit to the kingship of Christ as an abstract concept, but when I am faced with the feeling of powerlessness in my daily life—say with a certain toddler—I am forced to realize how strong my desire for authority is.

The Epiphany, this encounter with God in the form of a toddler, is an invitation to see how connected are my relationship to God and my relationship to the stuff of everyday life. How will I kneel before Christ the king if the rest of my life is an exercise in defending my own power? And, of course, one need not have a toddler to find his or her authority challenged in the course of daily living. During this season of the incarnation, may we learn to see such challenges as God himself at work in our lives, recreating our hearts that they may be governed less and less by Herod—that is pride, fear, and rage—and more and more by the King before whom we kneel in humility and wonder, offering nothing less than our whole lives.