

January 7, 2018
 Epiphany
 “The Case for Herod”

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Matthew 2: 13-18, *Common English Bible*

When the magi had departed, an angel from the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up. Take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod will soon search for the child in order to kill him.” Joseph got up and, during the night, took the child and his mother to Egypt. He stayed there until Herod died. This fulfilled what the Lord had spoken through the prophet: *I have called my son out of Egypt.*

When Herod knew the magi had fooled him, he grew very angry. He sent soldiers to kill all the children in Bethlehem and in all the surrounding territory who were two years old and younger, according to the time that he had learned from the magi. This fulfilled the word spoken through Jeremiah the prophet:

*A voice was heard in Ramah,
 weeping and much grieving.
 Rachel weeping for her children,
 and she did not want to be comforted,
 because they were no more.*

We have come to the end of the Christmas season. Having probably lived through a few dozen of them, you know all the main players and storylines by now. Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus are right at the center. We also celebrate angels and shepherds, and magi usually show up bearing baby gifts. We may even see an assortment of friendly barnyard animals—probably a donkey, and maybe some sheep and a cow. There could even be an innkeeper, who shuts the door in Joseph’s face, or kindly offers a private stable, depending on our mood.

But there is one figure from this tale that we don’t spend too much time on: King Herod. He is a mean and nasty villain, in a story that we like to think of as warm, happy and inspiring.

On Christmas Eve, we usually read the story of how the magi came to his court, asking where they can find the child that has been born King of the Jews. Herod was the real life political leader of the Jews, and he was shrewd. Too shrewd not to realize the threat in another “king”, and too shrewd not to take advantage of the magi’s quest. These seemingly naïve foreigners could provide him with crucial intelligence. So, he plays nice, telling them to report to him when they find the child, so that he, too, can show his respect to the infant king.

But Herod underestimated the wise men. They saw through his fake hospitality, and returned to their home by another route. And there, our reading usually ends.

We usually skip Part II of the story. Nobody really wants to hear it because it's horrifying. It's not something we want children to experience right before they go home to visions of sugar plums. It's not something we want to haunt our dreams on the happy night. But here's the facts: Herod was furious that the magi double-crossed him. So, he sent his soldiers out to commit an atrocity—they were to bust into every Jewish home in the region, pull every male infant from the arms of his mother, and cut their tiny, precious throats.

Why do we need this dark and terrible story at the end of the bright and joyful tale of Christ's birth? The tale has been all hearts and flowers; but then, the fists of Herod's soldiers are pounding on the door with murderous intent. Mothers are crying bitter, heart-broken tears. Tiny tombs are being dug for the most innocent of victims.

Maybe a closer look at Herod will shed some light.

In this story, Herod is near the end of his life and his 41-year reign. He was a king only because Rome said he was—the people had no particular allegiance to him. He was a Jew, just like them, and they knew that Rome was really in charge. Herod just did their dirty work, beating the rebellious colony of Israel into submission.

Over his life, Herod had at least nine wives and 14 children. There may have been more, but girls' births weren't always recorded. He put his wife Mariamne on trial for adultery, and coerced her own mother to testify against her. After he had Mariamne executed, her mother declared herself queen. A very bad life choice, because Herod simply had his mother-in-law executed, too.

But there's more. Mariamne had two young sons, and as they grew older Herod began to see them as threats. He was able to manipulate the Roman Emperor Augustus into allowing him to execute these two sons. It is reported that Augustus' comment on the affair was, "I would rather be Herod's dog than Herod's son."

But there's more. Herod named his oldest son, Antipater (from a different mother) the heir to his throne. But Herod's paranoia and narcissism couldn't tolerate what he saw as a potential rival. So he had Antipater put on trial for treason and executed. At this, even the Roman Emperor was appalled. He refused to allow any of Herod's remaining sons to be called "king."

After Herod's death, three of his sons would each rule a third of their father's kingdom as "tetrarchs." And 33 years later, Herod Antipas, son of King Herod, would see Jesus in chains, wearing a crown of thorns, just before Jesus died on the cross as a Roman prisoner.

We can't be sure when exactly the wise men stopped in Jerusalem to ask directions at the palace, but it was probably during this last, awful year of Herod's reign, when he executed his oldest son. Can there be any doubt that this man was capable of slaughtering babies?

So, why, in the beautiful Christmas story, do we have this horrible sidebar of a horrible human? Maybe his presence has to do with how **Herod reminds us what kind of world we live in**. We may have all had a lovely Christmas, it may have been all hearts and flowers for us, but this isn't really a hearts and flowers world. We have many neighbors who didn't have lovely Christmases.

There are Syrian refugees right at this moment trying to save the lives of their families. Many of them are Christians, but I wonder what kind of Christmas they had this year?

In Myanmar, the Rohingya people are being subjected to genocide. The stories of what they are being subjected to are absolutely appalling. So appalling I won't repeat it here. I dare you to Google it.

There are over 870 million people on earth right now who don't have enough to eat. Eight hundred. Seventy. Million. Hungry. While my (and probably your) larder is filled with enough food for more than a month. Try to wrap your brain around that.

And in our country, racism, sexual harassment, opioid addiction, poverty and violence exist at alarming rates. We should be working intensely on all these fronts, but we are more divided than we have ever been in recent history. It's hard to impossible to create any change for good when we are at each other's political throats.

Here's my point—**Herod is alive and well, as he inhabits human hearts and human systems today**. We shouldn't be looking back on this story, saying "Whew! Things were so bad back then!" We should be looking at our world, our nation, and ourselves and saying, "Evil is here, and I'm involved in it, one way or another." And it's the Herod part of the story that reminds us of this.

But **Herod also reminds us that we need a Savior, and we have received one**. Jesus didn't come to give us a winter holiday of fun and festivities. Despite how we romanticize it, he wasn't born into a Christmas-card scene of peace and beauty. Rather, he was born into the real world—a broken world full of villains and heroes, hate and love, misery and joy. He was born into our real world, where we struggle, grieve and worry; the real world where there is hunger and feasting, violence and peace, conflict and cooperation, human trafficking and justice.

Jesus came not to give us a party, but to be Immanuel, God-with-us, the Word made flesh. He came to die for our sins, and rise again for our sakes. He came to forgive the little bit of Herod in all of us. He came to show us a better way, a way of love, peace and goodness. He came to empower and enable us to live in that way. He came to establish his Kingdom on this earth through our lives. Yes, **the Kingdom of God is realized through our very lives**, as we love and follow Jesus.

I said earlier that we are all involved in the evil of this world, one way or another. We are either a part of the solution, or we are a part of the problem; and Jesus came to call us to be a part of the solution. We are to break down walls of hate with our love, to deny violence with our peace, to heal struggle with our hope.

So, Herod helps us keep focused on our mission. Because of the Herods of this world, we have important things to do. You may be aware of the mission of our congregation:

Grow FAITH in Jesus Christ.
Share LOVE with others.
Give SERVICE to our neighbors.

Whenever we are growing faith, sharing love or giving service, Herod shrinks a little and the Kingdom of God gets a little stronger. Our denomination has a mission statement that puts it another way:

The mission of the church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ
for the transformation of the world.

That transformation is away from the kingdom of Herod, and toward the Kingdom of God. So the question is...how are you going to participate in that mission? It's a new year, a chance to reflect on your life and how you are making a difference. How will you, personally, transform the world away from Herod and toward Christ?

Praise God that this angry, paranoid, narcissistic, violent, ruthless, frightened man isn't at the center of the Christmas story. But praise God that through him, we can be reminded of what kind of world we live in, and why we need a Savior.

So enough about Herod for now. Let's slip him into our back pocket. Let's remember that he's there, and why, but turn our focus in this new year to things above, where Christ is, seated at God's right hand (Colossians 3: 1), but also seated right beside us. Let's focus on the goodness that he brings into our lives, goodness that he calls us to share with a broken and hurting world. Let us transform the world with his love, peace and hope.

References:

<https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/the-worlds-10-hungriest-countries/>