

Keeping Herod in Christmas

Matthew 2:13-23

Most of us are used to the Christmas story according to Luke, which is a beautiful, gentle version. It is a story filled with angels and shepherds, and animals gently surrounding the child in the manger.

But Matthew shows us another side of the story, which contains political intrigue, plotting and scheming, as well as petty jealousy and fear. It also contains the murder of innocent children, the wailing of grief stricken mothers, and the flight of the holy family into Egypt.

Only Matthew tells us about the magi. The magi, or wise men, as we call them, came from some unknown place in the east. We don't know where they came from, we can only speculate. Certainly they were strangers to Israel, or else they wouldn't have gone to Herod for help. Herod was a vassal king, who ruled at the pleasure of the Romans. He had a wide reputation for cruelty and for petty jealousy; he once ordered one of his own sons murdered because he thought the son was a threat to his rule. So Matthew's readers would know immediately that to go to Herod seeking information about the one "*born to be king of the Jews*" was bound to be a bad idea. A very bad idea! Herod considered himself the king of the Jews and any threat to his throne would be dealt with very harshly.

So when Herod tells the magi to go and search for the child and then come back and report to him, so that he may worship the child also, Matthew's readers know that this is just not going to happen. Herod will not worship anyone or anything that he sees as a threat to his throne and all the perks that go with it!

The magi, of course, find the Christ child, and worship him as they bring their gifts to him. And then Matthew tells us, "*Having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.*" And Matthew's readers would have breathed a sigh of relief, for the newborn Messiah was apparently safe from the evil king.

But not for long! For Herod was more evil than even the Magi could have guessed. Using the information he has gained from them, Herod orders the murder of every male child in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were the age of two and under. That would surely kill the threat to his throne, thinks Herod.

But Joseph, like the magi, has been warned in a dream about Herod and takes Mary and his baby son Jesus and flees to Egypt, out of the sphere of influence of the evil, maniacal, homicidal king. There Jesus hides safely, with his parents until Herod dies. Matthew's version of the birth of our Lord is not quite as gentle and loving as Luke's account.

I know more than one religious scholar who claims that Herod's massacre of newborn boys simply did not happen. They claim that Matthew must have made it up for theological reasons. Certainly, there are theological reasons for the inclusion of the story. Matthew, writing for a Jewish Christian audience, would want his readers to see the parallels between the life of Jesus and the life of Moses and the people of Israel. Moses' life was spared in a similar reported slaughter in the Old Testament. The people of Israel sojourned in Egypt for a time, for their safety during a time of famine. Matthew's readers would have been quick to pick up on the similarities of the stories.

That is all true enough. But isn't it a bit incredible that anyone who lives in an age when dictators such as Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot, and Saddam Hussein are recent memories - to say nothing of contemporary mass murderers - would find it difficult to believe that rulers can order the slaughter of children for their own political purposes?

Everything we know about Herod the Great, and most of what we know comes from the Jewish historian Josephus, who had access to Herod's own court records - everything - suggests that Herod was exactly the kind of man who would order the murder of all the babies in a particular village if he had even the slightest suspicion that anyone was talking about a future king among the lot. Josephus reports that Herod did indeed have several members of his own family executed because of his paranoia about plots against his rule. So it's no real strain on the imagination to think that this same Herod would do exactly what Matthew said he did.

Matthew tells the story of the birth of Jesus from a real-life perspective. There, in Matthew are the wailing mothers, the crying, slaughtered babies, and the holy family fleeing for their lives into Egypt as refugees.

The way Matthew tells the Christmas story is a bit at odds with the story we've come to know and love, the Nativity story as it is told by Luke. Consider the significance of telling the story as Matthew tells it. Herod is there as a cold, realistic reminder of what sort of world this is for many of God's children. Herod's presence in the story ensures that the Nativity story is a very realistic story, a very political story.

What good would the Incarnation of God have been if it had not come to us in this way? If God had come in some fairy-tale like story of sentiment and sweetness, what would that have to do with the real world - with our world? Don't we sometimes sentimentalize Christmas? We sing, *"all is calm, all is bright. . ."* But the world into which Jesus was born was anything but that. Jesus was born into a world that was - and is - populated with evil rulers who would murder children to keep their power, a world filled with darkness. To deny the reality of that world is just another way of keeping Jesus irrelevant, keeping him at the margins of our lives, rather than at the center.

Jesus fiercest emotions were reserved for those who took advantage of the *"little ones,"* be they infants or the helpless vulnerable ones in society. Do you remember those words of Jesus that were pierced with rage? *"And whoever causes one of the little ones who believe in me to*

stumble, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea." Having spent the early years of his life as a refugee, and being told of the antics of Herod, it is not so surprising that Jesus should speak with such passion.

Matthew's nativity, with Herod and all, reminds us this Sunday after Christmas: Into the world, the real world where we live, and work, and struggle has come a Savior who is Christ the Lord. He does not remain above the fray. Rather, he enters into it that he might bring us to God.

Christmas is God's eternal sign that the forces of evil will not win! It will never happen. Evil may sit for awhile on the throne but not forever!

Predicting the future is always risky. Change can come so fast. Who could have predicted even a few decades ago the rise of a radical, murderous groups like ISIS, or Boko Haram? Not just individuals, whole armies dedicated to death and destruction. Who would have dreamed Russia would interfere in an American election? Life is hard to predict. A little more than a century ago "experts" were predicting that people were burning wood so fast, there would be no trees left by 1920. Predicting the future is always difficult. There is only one thing we can be sure of: *God will win.*

That is the good news for this Sunday after Christmas. The Herods of the world may have their day, but the eternal victory belongs to Christ. And that conviction keeps us moving forward from one Christmas to the next, regardless of how dark things may appear.

The writers of the Gospels knew about the importance of hope. "*The light shines in the darkness,*" wrote the author of John's Gospel, "*and the darkness has not overcome it.*" And we are recipients of that hope.

So do not despair. We live in a difficult world, but God has overcome the world and God will not forsake God's own.

In today's gospel, we catch the earliest glimpse that Jesus' life is not going to be some sweet bye and bye spirituality, but his presence is going to unsettle the powers that be. Beginning shortly after Christmas, we already know Jesus will be a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief. Beginning now, we learn of a Jesus who is engaged with the suffering of humanity; weeping our tears, and feeling our heartache.

Today we leave the innocence of the cradle and prepare ourselves for a ministry of weeping – weeping over abandoned children; weeping over violence and cruelty that never seem to go away; weeping over broken relationships; weeping over prejudice and hatred. We weep and pray that God is able still to be a witness.

We weep ... but the good news is that we can see through the tears. Herod died long ago, and Jesus - God with us – lives. Herod had his moment in history, a moment that was futile. The child, however, born of God, lives and grows and of his kingdom there shall be no end. Death

will not destroy his kingdom. The child lives. And though we may weep, we do not weep as those who have no hope.

And that, perhaps, is the most wonderful news we have to speak this morning. We do not weep as those who have no hope. Planted in the hearts and minds of all who believe in Jesus is the knowledge that our lives are blessed with hope.

Hope, in the words of the Apostle Paul, is the knowledge that our lives are not lived in vain. Hope is the knowledge that death has been conquered. Hope is the deepest of all convictions that our lives are destined for glory.

Thanks be to God, as we prepare to enter a new year and forever more. Amen.

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