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First Presbyterian Church
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Matthew 2:13-23

“Walk in the Light: Learning from Herod What Not To Do”

Last week I talked about Joseph and the week prior Carrie talked about Mary in this sermon series “Walk in the Light” in which we’re reflecting through the stories of the people at the manger as to how we can prepare our hearts and minds for the birth of our Savior.

Today we’re looking at Herod. Now I understand why you might think at first, “What in the world could we possibly learn from Herod about how to prepare our hearts and minds for the Christ child?” Well, sometimes we learn as much (if not more) from those whose example we shouldn’t follow as much as we do from the example of those we should follow. So today we’re talking about Herod and what not to do if you want to walk in the light of Christ.

So, who is Herod? Herod the Great, as he was known, was born in Idumea, south of Judea, around 72 BCE. His father, Antipater (Ann-TI-puh-ter), was a high-ranking official in the Hasmonean government. Herod's mother was a Nabatean Arab princess from Petra. Herod's father's good relations with Julius Caesar likely helped Herod rise to power and be appointed governor of Galilee when he was only 25 years old. But he fought for control of his kingdom for several years, and it wasn’t until 37 BCE that he captured Jerusalem and became the sole ruler of Judea. Herod maintained a private security force and built fortresses at Jerusalem, Caesarea, and Masada, just to name a few. He was never far from a defensible refuge, which tells me that Herod lived his life in fear of losing power and control.

He killed descendants of the Hasmoneans so he would have no rival, and when he suspected intrigue in his own family, he killed his wife and one of his sons. Before he died, he instructed that at his death all political prisoners should be killed so that there would be no mourning throughout the land. And

while there is no other record of the killing of innocents such as Matthew tells us about today, killing all male children under the age of 2 because you're scared out of your mind that you may lose power and control, is in keeping with Herod's character.

Plus, does it really matter if the story is historically accurate and true? Not really. Because the story is true. Herod is alive and well in the world today. In fact, I believe he recently fled from Syria to Russia. Herod's story is lived in every age throughout history, and the Herods of this world will always seek to destroy life, and that which is sacred and holy. But Herod also lives in our families and relationships. He's even in some of **our own** words, actions, and choices. Herod is our indifference that prevents compassion, our hate and anger that destroy love, our busyness and distractions that deny presence, and our violence and anxiety that defeat peace. Our world and sometimes our lives are full of Herods.

Now, most of us know the story of the Magi, the 12 verses that precede today's story, which we hear on Epiphany. But curiously, the lectionary gives us this story on the Sunday after Christmas, a day many of us are absent, including the preacher! Which is why I've never preached on this story before today.

When our story opens, the Magi have just left the infant Jesus after giving him their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, and an angel appears to Joseph yet again in yet another dream to warn him to take his family to Egypt because Herod is searching for Jesus in order to kill him. You see, Herod can't have a baby who is rumored to be the Messiah and King of the Jews running around because that would mean he'd lose power and control. And as we've already heard, Herod doesn't like that.

So the Holy Family flees. I can imagine the scene: Joseph stuffing together their belongings in a flurry of activity; the child crying; the mother exhausted; Joseph's heart clutching in his throat every time he sees a soldier. But the nightmare doesn't end once they get to Egypt. It grows as word spreads that back home Herod killed all the male children under the age of two and "their mothers wail with loud lamentation". Those are Matthew's words, but I'm sure

it was much worse than that. How swiftly and how far we have traveled from gold, frankincense, and myrrh to homes drenched with the blood of children because a tyrant fears any potential challenge to his power and authority!

Is it any wonder we avoid this story at Christmas, preferring the story of shepherds and angelic choruses singing “Glory to God in the Highest, and on earth peace to those whom he favors . . .”? But the intense compression of Matthew’s story from magi to murder in 18 verses reveals a truth about the human condition: that the pendulum between hope and nightmare can swing quickly, is often fragile, and can be dependent on just 1 or 2 or 3 people choosing faith over fear.

But our story isn’t done. Joseph has a third dream, in which an angel tells him that Herod has died so it’s safe to return home. Home! After dealing with a strange language and different food and customs and the ambiguous state of being refugees, they can finally go home.

But no sooner do they land back in the old neighborhood than the old nightmare returns. But this time, Joseph doesn’t even need to dream it. Herod may be dead, but his son Archelaus has taken his place. And he’s so bad and brutal that even the Romans later remove him from power, and the Romans were not usually intolerant of brutality.

And so this is how Jesus’ life begins according to Matthew: born to a single Mom, living as a refugee, fleeing from Judea to Egypt and then Egypt to Judea and finally from Judea to Galilee all because of a tyrant and his fear and his need for power and control.

Friends, today’s Gospel is a reminder whether we want it or not that the world did not get cleaned up, sanitized, and made presentable for the birth of Jesus. No new paint on these nursery walls. Instead, we get a stark reminder that Jesus was born into Herod’s world, and it’s grim and terrifying. As Joy Carroll Wallis writes, "Herod represents the dark side of the gospel. He reminds us that Jesus didn't enter a world of sparkly Christmas cards or a world of warm spiritual sentiment. Jesus enters a world of real pain, of serious dysfunction, a

world of brokenness and political oppression.” This doesn’t mean, however, that all is lost. and here’s the Good News and what we must learn. The world of Herod may be the world into which Jesus is born, but it’s also the world in which Jesus reveals God is with us and for us. It’s a world where angels mane sneak into dreams – three times, at that! – and a father trusts them despite all evidence to the contrary. It’s a world in which 3 Kings who didn’t even share Joseph and Mary’s religion, go to pay their child homage, and ignore the demands of their ruler because they know he’s up to no good and what he wants to do isn’t right. It’s a world in which many people whose stories we don’t even hear about likely took the holy family under their wings and provided them food and shelter when they needed it, even though that would have put them in a dangerous situation. It’s a world in which some people chose right over might, taking whatever gifts they had, no matter how insignificant they may have appeared, and used them to protect that which is holy and sacred so a child could grow up to become the Savior of the World.

Friends, this story is wonderful, good news despite the terror and pain that envelopes it. But it’s also a cautionary tale. For you see, Jesus could have brought salvation to Herod, too, but Herod rejected him. Herod could have chosen to guard and protect the divine life, too, but he didn’t. He preferred the life he knew, where his might made right, or at least he thought it did, and he could build fortresses and control with a decree who lived and who died. So let us learn from Herod what not to do; let us not allow our fear of losing control or power get in the way God’s work; instead, let’s protect that which is holy and sacred. Like Joseph, let’s take what is offered to us and entrusted to us and treat it like the divine gift it is.

So this week, here’s what I want you to do. I want you to look at your life. With what gift has God entrusted you? And don’t give soft, vague, or mushy answers like love, peace, or happiness. Put some flesh and blood on your answers because God comes to us in very tangible ways.

Maybe God has given you the gift of laughter which makes for fun times for the people around you. Maybe you’re given the gift of gab so you can help

someone who is lonely. Maybe God has given you a wonderful partner, and maybe together you've learned how to be awesome parents. Maybe you're a writer, and your writings spark joy in others. Maybe you're a teacher, and you're imparting or have imparted curiosity in others. Maybe you have a passion for the poor, feeding the hungry, speaking out for justice, or visiting the sick or dying. I know some of you have the gift of prayer, and I know some of you have the gift of caring for those who are sick or wounded. Maybe you read, think, and question so your eyes are open to new ways of seeing. Maybe you're creative, and your creations bring beauty to the world.

All of these things and thousands of others are gifts and abilities that God has entrusted to us. With each gift God says, "Here, this is yours. Care for it. Guard it and protect it. Nurture it. I trust this to you. I have no one else. You are the one to do this." What is that gift God has given to you, and how will you protect it and care for it in a world of Herods?

Answering that question begins with waking up to the presence of God in your life. Isn't that what Joseph did? It first happened when the angel told him Mary was going to bear a son and he had a role to play in it; so he chose to listen to God speaking through that angel and took Mary as his wife. And today it happens again – God speaks through the angels, and Joseph chooses God over Herod, even though he had so much at stake: his reputation, his livelihood, his home.

Friends, don't sleep through what God is trying to do in your life. Nurture the gift (or gifts) God has entrusted to your care. Create a home for Jesus. And as you do that, don't be too anxious or distracted by Herod. Remember, neither God nor Joseph dealt directly with Herod. They didn't give him the time, attention, and effort. Maybe we shouldn't, either. This doesn't mean we should ignore the Herods or deny they exist, but perhaps it does mean we should spend more time nurturing, feeding, and growing in the divine life; which is to say, cultivating deep relationships, living a life of prayer, and loving all people so that holiness wins.

So hold onto your faith, and trust that while we may live in a world of Herods, we also live in a world in which each one of us is given a divine gift to nurture and care for so that God's will may be done on earth as it is in heaven. Which means that despite all news to the contrary, that Herod does not have the final word. Darkness will not prevail. So let us declare the real joy of Christmas this year: that nothing can defeat God's promise of Immanuel, God with us.

Let's pray.

Loving and steadfast God,

In a world where darkness often seems to hold sway, we give thanks for the good news that no Herod, no hardship, no heartache can separate us from your love. You are with us in our joy and in our sorrow, in the beauty and the brokenness of life. Hold us close when the way feels hard, and strengthen us to carry your light into the shadows. Remind us daily of your unshakable promise to stay with us, no matter what may come.

Let this truth fill our hearts with hope and courage, so we may be bearers of your love to a world in need. Amen.

Sources:

Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 1, commentary on Matthew 2:13-23
Interrupting the Silence, "Holiness Always Wins", Michael K. Marsh