

Advent Sermon Series 2009

*The “Lesser” Christmas Characters 2: Herod the King, in His Raging*

Matthew 1:18-25

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6 December 2009

Another advent season is upon us, the beginning of a new Christian year. We're inundated with images and sounds, tastes and smells that signal Christmastime is here. That's the power of icons, their ability to invoke thoughts and feelings in us. But sometimes the evocative power of those icons does the thinking for us. It's like a holiday form of shorthand, but in relying on it so heavily, we stop reading the story for ourselves. So this advent, as we prepare ourselves for the birth of the Christ child, I want to look at the story from the perspective of Christmas characters who don't have many carols written about them. The advent of Christ presents all of us with certain choices: How will we respond to this birth? What will it mean to us? What will we do? As we tell the story of some of the “lesser” Christmas characters, we consider what choices were presented to them, what they decided, what they made of the ultimate Christmas gift. Last week we considered the story of the most well-known of these secondary characters, Joseph. I only know of two Christmas carols about him, but at least he makes it into the nativity scenes. The rest of our characters do not, and certainly not the fellow we'll be hearing about today: King Herod.

There are actually two different Herods, father and son, who bookend the story of Christ, playing crucial roles during Jesus' birth and again at his death. These two Herods are definitely villains in the Christian story, but they are also villains in history. Yet Christians tend to know very little about these kings aside from their guest appearances in the gospels.

The Herod that appears in our Christmas story is the one known as Herod the Great, but the historical Herod has very little to do with our story. Indeed, we might as well call the gospel Herod a fictional character. The story told in the Bible is not documented anywhere else, whereas when it comes to his son, Herod Antipas, at least some of the gospel story may be corroborated by outside sources.

But what I did learn about Herod the Great was very interesting. He lived through the era of Julius Caesar, as the Roman Republic was transformed into the Roman Empire. Herod was politically wily, and through that tumultuous transition, he managed to successfully switch sides and back whoever appeared to be winning. First his father helped finance Caesar's murderers Brutus, Cassius, *et al*, as immortalized in Shakespeare's play. But when Caesar's murder proved to be an unpopular move, Herod the Great backed Marc Anthony of “Friends, Romans, Countryman” fame, claiming that his father had been forced to finance the traitors. Then when Antony's rival Octavian gains the upper hand, Herod declares his allegiance, somehow how managing to be convincing enough that Octavian, later Emperor Augustus, would support Herod's claim to the throne of Judea for the rest of his life. Whatever else we may think of Herod, you have to admit that it's pretty impressive that he switched sides *three times* during a civil war and managed to emerge smelling like roses! This is a guy who clearly knew how to play the political game.

And his wiles did provide some benefit to his people, because he was able to secure a degree of religious freedom for the Jews. All subjects of Rome were required to participate in the cult of the Emperor, but Herod negotiated a deal whereby the Jews exempted themselves from what they considered to be idolatrous worship by paying a tax instead. As a result, taxes under Herod's rule were quite high, but Jews could keep their consciences clear. Furthermore, Herod didn't spend all his taxes on himself. Judea enjoyed great stability and prosperity during his reign. He was also a great architect and

built monuments that not only still exist in Israel to this day, but are some of the most iconic buildings of that nation's history, including the port city of Caesarea Maritima, the fortress of Masada, and a huge rebuilding and expansion of the Temple itself, including the only part of it that still stands, the Western Wall.

But for all those accomplishments, the fact remains that Herod was a brutal and bloodthirsty leader who massacred anyone whom he suspected of opposing him, including his second wife, his mother-in-law, and his three eldest sons. So while it can't be verified that he ordered the murder of the boys of Bethlehem, it is completely within his character to have done so. His own people loathed him, yet the Romans loved him, and his power was cemented when the Roman Senate declared him to be "King of the Jews." So while the facts of his life do not appear in the gospels, nevertheless we can recognize the historical Herod in the gospel character.

If Joseph represented the ordinary, every day human choice of a husband and father, Herod represents the political version, as husband and father of the Jewish people. Joseph thinks he's going to marry a good Jewish woman and settled down to a respectable life, but then the Christ child unexpectedly enters his life. Joseph has a choice, and he chooses to embrace this new future, extending his love and protection to Mary and her son.

Herod's story parallels Joseph's in some ways. He is the king, a kind of father to his people, and it has been a difficult reign. He too had been looking for a good Jewish wife to provide a son and heir to him, a legacy he can leave behind. He had at least ten wives, and many sons, but he has killed off three of his own sons because he fears them as rivals. At the time of our story, around 4 BC, Herod is now seventy years old. He will in fact die very soon, but the issue of his succession has not yet been decided. He will keep naming heirs and then killing them off right up to his death. Rome will have to declare Herod Antipas his heir after Herod the Great dies. Joseph and Herod, two men, two fathers, hoping for a son to carry on his legacy.

Both men are visited by mysterious messengers. Joseph is visited by an angel in a dream. Herod is visited by foreign astronomers, magicians, wise men. The angel and the wise men bear surprising news: the future will not go as planned. There is indeed an heir, but it's not the one either man expected. God is breaking into their lives.

The wise men appear in Herod's court asking, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?" That certainly grabs Herod's attention. That's his title, the very one bestowed on him by the Roman Senate! Yet his own people have always challenged his right to it. Here now is his chance to take on an heir who has been anointed not by Rome but by God! The Messiah, the ultimate heir! But it would not be flesh of his flesh.

In patriarchal societies, men valued sons, and they went to great lengths to insure that they were the father of their wives' sons. This patriarchal privilege is what Joseph gave up in order to adopt Jesus, yet he chose the better part: a son not of biology but from God. Herod is presented with the same choice, but he chose not to adopt this unexpected heir.

This whole plot with the Magi cannot be corroborated from outside sources, but we see all the marks of the historical Herod in it. His deviousness and political savvy as he consults his own experts and then plays the Magi, presenting a pious face when he's actually asking them to do his dirty work for him. He's good enough at it that another angel has to warn the Magi of the trick. When the Magi elude Herod, he orders the murder of all male children under the age of two in Bethlehem and the surrounding area. Within the context of the Bible, this story echoes that of Moses, who also escaped the plot of a brutal tyrant to kill the male children. But the real Herod was willing enough to kill his own sons in order to protect his power, so this kind of crime is entirely within his character.

So there we have it: Joseph the ultimate father, and Herod the ultimate anti-father. But if we're looking at these stories as we consider the choices that the Christ child presents to us, then how can Herod be an example to us? After all, many of us are parents, but none of us are monarchs.

Yet I do think Herod's story challenges us. Joseph is about family, but Herod is about politics, and as the feminists like to say, "The personal is political." We run the risk of becoming too complacent if we focus on Joseph and think lovely thoughts about fathers teaching their sons in the carpentry shop. But the truth is we also covet the kind of power Herod had. Politics. Are there times when we sell people out for our personal gain? Are there times when we metaphorically murder people whom we perceive to be rivals? Do we crave power as Rome gives it, as the world bestows it, rather than power as God gives it?

It's one thing for God to ask Joseph to give up dreams of a Joseph, Jr. But the choice God offers to Herod is much starker. God is asking Herod to give up not his power, but his belief about what power is. Herod knows power as political savvy, as wealth and prestige, as brute force. But God enters the world without any of these things. God enters the world as a tiny infant, poor and helpless. The only power Herod recognizes here is that this infant may one day grow into a rival (and how is it that a 70 year old man will live long enough for an infant to grow old enough to pose a political threat?). Herod utterly fails to recognize the power that the Christ child truly possesses: the power to change people's hearts.

In some ways, that's what Herod wanted all along. The Jews never accepted him as their king, and everything he ever did to try to please them only caused them to hate him all the more. He rebuilt the Temple itself! With his revisions, the Temple became the largest religious site in the entire world! Surely this would make the Jews realize how faithful and pious he was, how worthy of their devotion. Yet above the entrance to his magnificent Temple, Herod placed a symbol that betrayed his true loyalties, that showed where he thought the power really came from. It was a Roman eagle. When a band of dedicated Jews smashed the eagle, Herod had them all arrested and executed. It was all he knew how to do. His son would inherit that same concept of power. He too would pay lip service to his religion while offering homage to Rome. He too would try to kill this so-called Messiah who claimed to be "King of the Jews."

We think we're better than Herod. We think Herod is the villain of the story, not us. I hope we are indeed better than Herod! And yet it's worth being honest with ourselves: where do we really see the power, in a newborn baby, or in a fierce Roman eagle? Would we give up our worldly power for power as God gives it? Are we so sure?