

Expecting Jesus Like Herod

Matthew 2.1-18

Every good story has a villain. In **Superman** it is Lex Luthor. In **The Lord of the Rings** it is Sauron. In **Star Wars** it is Darth Vader. In the Christmas story, it is Herod.



Now today in our scripture passage we will meet several magi—a curious group of Iraqi star gazers, and we run again into Joseph as well, but it is Herod I want you to pay attention to today. John talked about Joseph last week, and Janene Steer will revisit the Iraqi star gazers on the Sunday after Christmas since they do play a key role in the story. But today, pay attention to Herod.

And as you do, listen in Matthew, chapter 2, verses 1-18, for God’s Word to you:

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi from the East came to Jerusalem, ² asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” ³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ⁶ ‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.’ ”

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the magi and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸ Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” ⁹ When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹ On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

¹³ Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” ¹⁴ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, ¹⁵ and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, “Out of Egypt I have called my son.”

¹⁶ When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the magi. ¹⁷ Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: ¹⁸ “A

voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.”

How many of you ever played King of the Hill on a mound of snow in the winter?

In 4th and 5th grade in Polson Montana, King of the Hill was one of our favorite winter games. The custodians at the school used a snowplow to clear the playground behind the building and dumped the cleared snow in a pile at the edge of the play field. And it was there that virtually every male in both grades gathered with one goal: to get to the top of that pile and stay there.

And for a while each year the game remained fairly good-natured and fun, but as the snow packed and slicked into ice, our little playground skirmishes to be king took on a more dangerous character, and one day that second year our little game turned into a pitched battle that left blood on the ice, if I remember correctly, one or two teeth. The next day we were informed by the principal that anyone on the mound the rest of the year would be expelled.

It strikes me now that that our final 5th grade battle on a mound of ice may have as much to do with the story of Jesus birth as the traditional lumber lean-to the men in our church built down the street from the school with its plug-in plastic Mary and Joseph and the Fischer-Price Jesus wrapped in a worn-out pillow case.

Sure, in the days after Jesus’ actual birth there was a manger of some sort and magi, shepherds and angels, but did you hear today what just the rumor of Jesus’ birth did in the King Herod’s court?

“Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?”

And “When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him.”

‘Frightened’ in English doesn’t do justice to the Greek. This is terror. And not just Herod but all Jerusalem.

Why terror at such a simple question? I think it is because this question signaled in Jerusalem another bloody round of King of the Hill... or as it was called back there and there... another round of King of the Jews.

Let me assure you, it would have taken quite something to shake up Herod let alone all Jerusalem with him... something like a royal star seen in a distant land so bright that an expedition of magi would feel compelled to marshal a force, gather supplies, and come to worship a king that had been crowned by the heavens.

It would have taken something this momentous because Herod’s position had been viciously untouchable. Talk about a King of the Hill. One Roman emperor was said to have commented: “Better to be one of Herod’s pigs than his son.”

Better to be one of Herod’s pigs than his son.

You see Herod executed three of his own children, and had his favorite wife strangled just to insure he remained on the throne. Other threats were dealt with just as definitively including the “accidental” death of a young but popular high priest whose fan club raised some Herodian concern. This young high priest drowned in a pool that was just a few feet deep. I bet the man’s successor thoughtfully kept a lower profile, and made it a policy to stay away from even shallow bodies of water.

Yet now, after years of Soprano-style rule, Herod faces an unexpected challenge from an unlikely source: a baby whose birth the skies announced.

For years I’ve wondered... maybe you have too... why Herod, as paranoid as he was, didn’t go with the magi to find Jesus. Yet in reading this text again now I have a guess why. I think his fear disappears the instant the priests tell him where the Messiah was to be born: Bethlehem. You see Bethlehem was almost within eyesight of Jerusalem... just ten miles away. Why Herod’s mounted soldiers could be there in under an hour. This threat to his throne, it

turns out, isn't some new-born prince in a citadel behind armed guard but just a baby born in a hovel within easy reach.

As soon as Herod hears this news, his whole demeanor seems to change. He asks for the magi to be sent in again. And as he waits, I imagined he let out a sigh of relief. Maybe he even chuckled because when they were back before him he says easily:

“Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.”

This from the man terrified moments ago. This from the brutal King of the Jews.

The magi do go and find Jesus, pay their homage, give their gifts, and would have returned to Jerusalem to report... only God suggests in a dream to these attentive Iraqis that they would be wise to find another way home... a back way... and so they do.

And ten miles away in Jerusalem, Herod doesn't expect this. He is smug and confident, because he believes even if the magi had guessed his real intention, they had too big an entourage to slip away unnoticed. Not only that, every camel interstate in the whole region converged at Jerusalem. The only other roads out of the slum that was Bethlehem would have been little more than a goat tracks.

So imagine Herod's fury then at their disappearance. The word for his rage is used only once in the New Testament—right here and it describes a white hot anger that would have banished all reason. And in this fury Herod orders the slaughter of any child in Bethlehem who could possibly threaten to his throne.

Expecting Jesus like Herod? That is our theme for today. But please! What possible way could we be anything like this animal defending his throne, his position, his privilege, and the status quo at any cost. How many kids do you think there were under two years of age in Bethlehem. Ten? Fifty? A hundred?

Did you know that the historian Josephus tells us that this animal, Herod the Great, when he was dying, ordered that his guards execute a number of city nobles as soon as he breathed his last? He gave them a list. Why? So that people would mourn after his death. You see, he knew that if he died alone nothing would happen but celebration.

What possible way could we be anything like this pig?



Only as soon as I ask this question it strikes me that Herod probably didn't start out like he ended up. His transition into a monster probably was just the real life version of what we see portrayed on the screen in the Star Wars saga where the gifted boy Anakin grows and twists into an evil who finally chooses a different name: Darth Vader.

As a child, Star Wars captured my imagination, and not just because I fell in love with Princess Leah and wanted to be Luke. I was also mesmerized by Vader—as I confess I am with Herod—and think at least part of the impact comes from the nagging thought that this story—bad as well as good—could be mine.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn, emerging from the horrors of the gulag system as the Soviet Union began to crumble wrote:

If only the struggle between good and evil were so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But [Solzhenitsyn says] the line of good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?

For Herod Jesus was simply a threat... the latest in a parade of threats. Expecting Jesus... you bet he was expecting Jesus... as one more challenger to his throne and at some point long before the angels ever filled the sky to sing of Jesus' birth Herod decided what he would do with the Messiah... destroy him.

The irony is that Herod died thinking he had: thinking he was still the only King of the Jews, believing that one of the babies slaughtered by his men in Bethlehem had been the star boy the magi had come to worship.

Over the years I've found it easy to cast Herod as the villain in our story... the villain who has nothing to do with me. But something in the pain I've felt here in the last few years has shaken me with a sense of how much Herod there is in me. You see, I've gotten a glimpse of the ugliness inside that spills out when I feel threatened.

And here is the truth: Jesus is a threat. Not just to Herod but to me: a threat to my position, my privilege, and the status quo in my life. The truth is that some of the blood and at least one of the teeth on the little mound of ice that represents my life is mine—I paid dearly to get to where I am today and Jesus' arrival in my life is a threat to my position and privilege and the tenuous balance I have established.

First off because Jesus' arrival in my life means a **demotion**. I gave you a little tour two weeks ago of Kingdom Kevin. We're back. I wish all I had to do was preach a sermon about surrender for it to happen in my life, but that isn't true. And it occurred to me that Christ the King Sunday doesn't come only once a year at the end of November. Today is Christ the King Sunday. Next Sunday is too. Jesus' birth in Bethlehem all those years ago didn't just unseat Herod, it unseated me and you too.

Of course we can close off our lives from this reality and set the alarm, and even die proclaiming our independence, but in a world created by God, held together by God for all time, and crying out for redemption, the truth is that Jesus' arrival means a demotion for me and for you.

It also means **disruption**.

Some of you have been praying for my mom. For about nine months now she has been fighting debilitating back pain, and in the last few months it has grown horribly to the point that each day feels like a losing battle against both the pain radiating from her back and the despair that even the strongest drugs do almost nothing.

And one of things I've noticed is that in the fight to make it through the next minute, the next hour, and the next day, fear has taken hold—fear that makes it very hard even to determine what will help and what will hurt. She has, along with my dad and the rest of us, begun to second guess guidance from this doctor or that. And of course it doesn't help that everyone seems to say something different.

And what this medical-emotional-spiritual crisis in our family has shown me is that in our lives—whether things are going well or poorly—we instinctively seek out some tenuous balance for making it through our days. Rarely is this balance ideal, but it's the best we can manage. Oh we might get beaten up along the way, but we've learned what to say when they wheel us into the ER to make sure life doesn't come crashing down completely. Don't rock the boat.

Did you notice the stunning line in the text that all of Jerusalem was as terrified as Herod? They were just as afraid of disruption even though the current King of the Hill was, for them, a brutal nightmare.

Could it be that in a similar way Jesus might be a threat for us simply because we know that his arrival in our lives will disrupt the tenuous balance we've set up so carefully? He says he comes to bring us life and life abundantly, but at what cost? A bird in the hand is better than two in the bush, right? Don't disrupt my life King Jesus.

Or maybe it is not demotion or disruption we fear, but rather the **change of direction** that Jesus will bring.

If God doesn't exist or only exists at a distance, we can, for good or ill, chart our own course. But if God does exist and comes to us in Jesus Christ, our course in life will need to change.

Expecting Jesus like Herod and all Jerusalem?

Think demotion. Think disruption. Think change of direction.

This is what Jesus' arrival means... and as such I submit that Jesus is a threat not just for Herod but for me and for you.

But maybe rather than seek to protect our position, our privilege and the tenuous balance in our lives, we might need to risk leaving Jerusalem and walking (or running) the ten miles to Bethlehem to see this one born King of the Jews.

For they say he can save people.

They say he frees people from battle to stay on top.

They say he brings life and life abundant.

And you know... that could be worth any threat.

Amen.

Charge

Jesus' arrival in our lives is a real threat to our position, our privilege, and the balance... however tenuous... we've created in our lives. But once we have faced this fact, we are free to meet Jesus as more... as hope and possibly the best shot at abundant life we will ever get.

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