**Herods still sit on Herod’s Throne**

A sermon for the 2nd Sunday of Christmastide

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Today is an unusual day in the church year. It’s the second Sunday after Christmas – a day we rarely celebrate. Christmas is only 12 days long, and so this most joyful but briefest of seasons rarely includes two Sundays. We’re nearly out of Christmas hymns to sing, and the lectionary Gospel takes us all the way through the Christmas story – past angels in the sky, past the shepherds in the fields, past the visit of the Eastern astrologers who followed a star – and into the next phase of Jesus’ infancy. This is a phase we rarely hear about. One that doesn’t seem to belong at Christmastime. One that may not be good for children, literally. One that reminds us that whatever they might say about wanting to know Christ, the powers of this world rarely intend to kneel at the manger and pay him homage with their lives.

I am speaking of course of King Herod, whose singular focus on maintaining his own power leads him to unspeakable acts of cruelty. They are so unspeakable that our lectionary literally omits them. You may have noticed that our Gospel reading from the second chapter of Matthew, skips from verse 15 to verse 19. Doesn’t it make you wonder what happened in verses 16, 17 , and 18 that someone deemed “not suitable to read in church”. It’s like editing out all the bad parts from a rated R movie so you can show it on TV. Well, here’s what’s missing:

When Herod saw that he’d been tricked by the wise men, 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 wise men. This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Jeremiah, “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.”

We call this the slaughter of the Holy Innocents. King Herod’s insecurity, his vengefulness, his need to remain in power, and most of all, his fury at being betrayed by people he trusted, caused him to lash out with unthinkable rage. His violent temper was directed not at those who wronged him, but at the most vulnerable, defenseless people in his kingdom. The level of pathology involved in feeling threatened by an infant makes it seem like Herod must be an imagined character. But make no mistake. Herod was a real person with a real problem. He came to power as something of an opportunist. One commentator puts it like this: “Herod the Great was an Idumean, who, backed by Rome, had established himself as king by military conquest of his own people.” While there is no historical mention of the massacre of the Holy Innocents beyond the Bible, there is plenty of extra-Biblical evidence indicating that rashly-conceived acts of extreme violence were so common for Herod, that this one might not have even risen to the level of being recorded for posterity. [[1]](#footnote-1)

But Matthew includes this story in the infancy narrative of his Gospel as a reminder that the presence of God on Earth will always be threatening to people in power – even when, especially when, God shows up as a vulnerable child needing care. It’s a little ironic that the powerful men in the Bible don’t feel particularly threatened by other powerful men – think of Pharaoh, or Sampson, or Goliath, or any of the hubris kings of ancient Israel, eager for war with the Assyrians or Babylonians. They are sure of their victory in tests of strength against strength, and eager to battle. It’s almost a game to these leaders, like sparring in martial arts. Of course, the harm caused in such tests of strength usually falls not on the combatants, but on those around them.

Rather, this Gospel story reveals what will be shown again and again throughout Jesus’ life -- that the powerful men in 1st century Palestine felt more threatened by the presence of the vulnerable and the weak. There is something destabilizing about the persistence of people in need to those who govern them – even when those needs are caused by normal occurrences, like being a child, being a widow, being an orphan, being differently abled, being poor. It begins with Herod feeling threatened by a baby. It continues with the Pharisees blaming blind and lame people for their diseases, the unjust judge dismissing the persistent widow, the rich man stepping over Lazarus at his gate, the Sanhedrin anxious about a rag-tag band of poor pilgrims marching to Jerusalem during the festival, and Annas, and Caiaphas, and Pilate.

Each of these powerful men in the Gospels are made uncomfortable by the presence of vulnerable people among them. They don’t all opt for murder, but they all reject and dismiss the weak and powerless in their midst, in a pattern so clear it feels almost instinctive. And each time, Jesus stands on the side of those in need, making visible the displaced and discarded, the unimportant and powerless. Because, as we learn here at the beginning of this story, he too was vulnerable as a child. He too was persecuted because he was politically threatening, was displaced, was forced to leave his home by the rulers of his day – as depicted in the WWII era poster in our Narthex. It shows the Holy Family as refugees in Egypt and calls on us to remember Jesus’ identification with those particularly vulnerable persons both during the Holocaust and in more present refugee crises.

I like to think we’ve made some progress since Biblical times. Not all leaders and not all people are made instinctively uncomfortable in the persistent presence of vulnerable people, their suffering and neediness. Some of world’s best leaders have modeled standing on the side of the most vulnerable because they themselves had known persecution and neediness: Nelson Mandela, Mohandas Gandhi, Mary Robinson, Vaclav Havel, to name a few. But many people, whether leaders or not, find true solidarity with vulnerable people too destabilizing to life as they know it. To sit with suffering that you did not cause and cannot solve for extended time, begins to demand a moral response – usually one that requires self-giving and a realignment of power. As so, as a human community, we continue to struggle to accept God’s offer of true freedom, which was Jesus’ entire life’s work.

Here’s how the theologian and poet Mark Heim puts it in one of his works from the early 2000s:

“Herods still sit on Herod’s throne.

The innocents still are massacred.

The inns are full of those who pay their way,

And the rest make out as best they may.

It is still hard to tell when babies will be born.

Some are searching like the magi.

Some are working like the shepherds,

Doing the work that must be done

Even on holidays.

By your story that has not worn out

Bring us to wonder

That you who mark the sparrow’s fall

Should choose to be this sparrow small

To share, to seek, and save us all.”

This prayerful poem reminds us that God’ saving offer in the birth of Christ is just that, an offer – one that we can accept or reject. The incarnation is not a guarantee that a hero will come and make everything all better. Transforming the world is our job as faithful people. God’s offer is a willingness to share our life, to seek out the lost among us and focus our attention there, to free us from the ways we hurt each other and grieve God’s own heart.

Most of us are unlikely to reject such an offer outright. The liberating freedom that a life lived in love with God offers for us and for the world is too beautiful to pass up. But most of us also find it very hard to accept the offer fully. Only very few let God be born in our hearts so fully that our lives become deeply changed, fully re-focused away from self-interest and towards the needs of the innocent, the voiceless, the whole community.

How do we, individually and as a whole, move closer and closer to accepting God’s offer of true freedom? To paraphrase the poem, we must allow God’s story to “bring us to wonder”, to a place where we marvel at it again – where it has the power to help us hear to God’s voice in our strange dreams, to follow stars that others don’t notice, to attend first to the vulnerabilities within and around us.

Does God’s story seems “worn out” to you? An interesting relic of an earlier time, but with modest relevance to us today; not something to be discarded entirely, but hardly something to move us to deep wonder or transform our lives? If so, on this 12th day of Christmas, I invite you to remember that Jesus is not the Word made flesh long ago, but the living word, alive for us. As the Christmas Carol says, “O Holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us we pray. Cast our our sin and enter in, be born in us today. We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell; O come to us, abide with us, our Lord, Emmanuel.”

1. Boring, M. Eugene. Introduction to the Gospel of Matthew. New Interpreters Bible Commentary, p142. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)