

“The Nightmare After Christmas”

Matthew 2:1-12

Series: Follow the Star Week 3. Herod and the Wisemen

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During my first years in the ministry, I was an Associate Pastor at another church. My responsibilities included children and youth ministry. One Christmas season, our church had a special evening Advent service similar to the one we had last Sunday. I asked the Senior Pastor to read the Scripture passage and then I would give a short message. I told him to read the Christmas story in Luke 2 starting with verse 16 which says,

So the shepherds hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger.

At the appropriate time, with the whole church family gathered in the sanctuary, he stood to read the passage. Unfortunately, he didn't read the Christmas story from Luke 2 starting with verse 16. He read the Christmas story from Matthew 2 starting with verse 16 which reads:

When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem...

Then he said, “And now Pastor Doug will give the children's sermon” and sat down.

Herod: it's a name you hear a lot in the New Testament. This name came up several times in our Follow series. When you go on pilgrimage to the Holy Land, you are certain to hear his name at nearly every location. There are a lot of Herods and it's tough to tell which you're talking about. Today, we will focus not on the Herod who condemned Jesus to death – that's Herod Antipas – but his father, the one who tried to kill Jesus at His birth: Herod the Great. He only appears on the stage of the Bible for a brief scene in Matthew 2. He is, however, a colossal figure in the history of the Holy Land. You rarely hear a sermon on his one contribution to the Christmas story – the massacre of two year old boys in Bethlehem. After all, Christmas is about the hope of a Child born to be king, not the horror of children put to death by a king. And yet Herod reminds us Jesus was not born in a nice church nativity scene. He came into a world full of suffering, violence, and fear, a world ruled by people like Herod, the world of sin we live in. So let me introduce you to Herod the Great, the author of the nightmare after Christmas.

For a brief one hundred years, between 167 and 67 BC, the Holy Land was an independent Jewish nation ruled by a family called the Hasmoneans also known as the Maccabees. Their victory over the Greeks in 167 BC will be celebrated by our Jewish friends this month during Hanukkah. The Hasmoneans started off faithful to God but, as with all rulers, power went to their heads. They conquered nations and forced them to convert to Judaism which involved more than transferring your membership. Males, in particular, had to go through a very painful ritual. One family forced to convert was Herod's father Antipater. So Herod did not come from a Jewish family. He was a half-Jew and that half was through conversion. Herod was born in 74 BC.

The Hasmoneans started fighting each other. Seeing an opportunity, Antipater and Herod played the warring factions off each other. They also called for help from another opportunist: Rome. It was a dangerous power game and in the process Antipater was murdered. Herod survived and became a rising star. He ruthlessly reached the top by two methods:

1. Marry into the Hasmonean Family – Herod wed Miriamne, a Hasmonean princess, even though he was already married. This, he hoped, would make him acceptable to the Jews.

2. Grovel before the Roman Authorities – Herod slavishly served whoever ruled over Rome: Pompey, Caesar, Cassius, Marc Antony or Octavian. Like an assembly line, the minute one was killed, he quickly pledged his allegiance to the next one in power. His plan worked. The Roman Senate proclaimed Herod King of the Jews. The Jews back home, however, didn't want him. With the might of Rome, Herod rampaged through the country until he captured Jerusalem. A massacre filled the Holy City and in 37 BC Herod ascended his blood-spattered throne.

It is easy to distance ourselves from someone so crafty, cunning and cut-throat. Yet Herod is very complicated. To quote those great theologians the Rolling Stones, I'm going to ask you to have a little sympathy for the devil. Why? If we are honest with ourselves, there may be a little Herod in our hearts. We all try to build our own kingdoms. The only difference between Herod and us may be he had the power to make his kingdom come and his will be done on a grand scale. Some of the desires which drove him may be lurking behind why we do what we do.

For example: **Herod Impressed People**. The key reason you frequently hear his name in the Holy Land is Herod's massive building program. On the coast of the Mediterranean, north of modern Tel Aviv, Herod constructed a gleaming city for the Romans named Caesarea. It features a theater, palace, hippodrome for horse races, aqueducts and a pagan temple where they worshiped Caesar Augustus. Since there are very few natural ports in Palestine, Herod constructed an artificial port using special concrete which hardens underwater. Herod built other impressive cities, palaces and fortresses throughout the country.

His greatest accomplishment by far is the Temple in Jerusalem. Herod didn't just enlarge the small Temple built when the Jewish exiles returned from Babylon, he also vastly expanded the platform to 145 acres – the largest man-made platform in the ancient world. The plaza you see today around the golden Dome of the Rock is Herod's design. The Western or Wailing Wall is actually the outside wall of the Temple Mount which contains many stones from Herod's day. When you stand before the Western Wall, there are still 19 more layers of stone beneath your feet. Tunnels take you down to the street level of Herod and Jesus' time where you can view a single stone 10 feet high, 45 feet long and weighing 570 tons – the largest stone ever moved without machinery. Herod the Great left a powerful impression carved in stone.

We like to impress others. You may notice this tendency as you attend holiday parties this month. People try to one up each other, top each other, subtly boast about their accomplishments. Tony Campolo is a pastor and the former head of the Sociology Department at Eastern University. Tony and his wife Peggy would go to parties attended by impressive guests with advanced degrees. At the time, his wife was at home full-time with their children. During the conversation when someone would say, "I am a lawyer with a Ph.D. in biomedical ethics," Peggy felt no one valued her if she said, "I'm full time raising my children." So when they asked, "And what is it that you

do, my dear?" she would respond, "I am socializing two Homo sapiens into the dominant values of the Judeo-Christian tradition in order that they might be instruments for the transformation of the social order into the kind of eschatological utopia that God willed from the beginning of creation." When Peggy asked, "And what do you do my dear?" the person replied, "I'm just a lawyer."

Endlessly impressing people is an exhausting way to live. You must continually come up with new stuff to top what others do or even what you've done in the past. The public quickly loses interest. Impressions are only the surface. The face we put out on Facebook is not the whole story. There is a lot behind it. What's more, there is no such thing as a lasting impression. They all fade away. Even Herod's impressive Temple was demolished less than a hundred years after his death. Don't get stressed trying to impress.

In another tactic **Herod Pleased People**. He wanted to be loved. So Herod built the Temple for the Jews and the temples for the Roman gods. He played both sides. In Jerusalem, he worshiped the Lord, in Rome, he worshiped Jupiter, in Caesarea, he worshiped the Emperor Augustus. Herod also married ten women. Imagine trying to please not just ten spouses but ten mother-in-laws. Herod actually had a constant battle with his mother-in-law Alexandra who secretly asked Cleopatra to get rid of him. In attempting to please everyone, Herod pleased no one. His Jewish subjects hated him. His Roman supporters doubted him. His wives and children manipulated him. This sent Herod on an emotional roller-coaster. When he wasn't executing others he planned to kill himself.

Pleasing people is an impossible task. And yet nearly all of us do it. There's a special time of year when we do it. It's called: Christmas. Isn't it tough to please everyone at Christmas? The gifts you buy are not the right size, color, model, price. It's not made with organic, non-GMO, rain-forest safe, bamboo microchips.

Singer-songwriter Christopher Cross knew how to please people – at least he thought he did. In the early '80s he earned an impressive list of accomplishments: five Grammy awards, one Oscar, and one Golden Globe award. He won them all back in 1981 and 1982, based on his debut album which included hits like "Ride Like the Wind" and "Sailing." But Cross's sudden rise to fame came to an abrupt halt after 1983. Cross continues to sing and perform but he doesn't receive the attention he once had. In one interview he says,

I had a nice 15 minutes of fame. My fall from grace was traumatizing, very hard to deal with and very disappointing and disillusioning. Success is like money—it's much harder to have it, then not have it, than never to have it at all.

Now, Cross says, his reminder of past fame comes when some "sweet young thing" asks him for an autograph ... for her grandmother.

What's the problem with pleasing people? Ultimately it's manipulative – we do things for others so they will like or love us and maybe even do what we want. It's serving with strings attached. Be kind and helpful to others without an ulterior motive. Just be kind and let it go. Don't impress. Don't please. Why? The king's third mistake.

Herod Was Paranoid About People. He feared conspirators around every corner, revolutions from the Jews, rejection from the Romans. The enemies he worried about most were in his own house. Herod executed his brother-in-law, his mother-in-law, his wife Mariamne and three sons who were supposed to succeed him. He built a network of fortresses to which he could flee for protection – the most famous of which is Masada. History tells us when Herod was on his deathbed he knew no one would mourn for him. So he tricked the leading citizens of Jerusalem to come to him in Jericho. Once they arrived, he kept them prisoner and gave orders that at the moment of his death they should be slain so there would be some weeping in his kingdom when he passed. Thankfully the order was not carried out.

So you can see why Herod panicked when the wise men announced a Child had been born king of the Jews. “When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him” (Matthew 2:3). The people know if Herod is stirred up, slaughter soon follows. Tricking the wise men into finding the Child for him, Herod hatches a plot to kill God’s Messiah. Now think about this: Herod knows this is the Chosen One sent by God Himself and he, a mere human, is going to stop the Almighty.

It seems crazy until we stop a minute and think how many times we’ve tried to keep Jesus out of our plans, dreams and schemes. We want to be in charge, in control. We don’t want God coming in and telling us what to do. We want to reign over the little kingdoms we’ve created. We have important agendas, money to make, tasks to accomplish, planes to catch. There’s little or no time for God, for prayer, for reading His Word, for worship, for helping others. We’re so busy with Christmas there’s no room for Christ.

Life is not about building a little kingdom. Life on earth is preparation for eternity. One day, all your accomplishments, all your investments, all your achievements will be swept away. Only what you invest in eternity will last. In 2007, I had the privilege of viewing the newly discovered tomb of King Herod himself. After two thousand years, it had finally come to light. Herod’s funeral procession was massive. The treasures buried with him were magnificent. But what did they find? A few bits of broken stone. In the end Herod, the rising star, did make a name for himself. Herod the Great is known as the murderer of the innocents.

When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. Matthew 2:16

Let’s not fear people. Let’s not live to please or impress people. Let’s bless people. We don’t know how many wise men there were. We don’t know any of their names. They may have been from Persia. They traveled a thousand miles for two years. They were from a different religion. They didn’t want to be rising stars. They followed a rising star.

After they had heard Herod, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And having been warned in a

dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route. Matthew 2:9-12

The wise men put aside their studies, left their country, traveled a long way, gave up their religion, gave everything they had to bless the Rising Star, the true King of the Jews. They knelt and worshiped the one who's Name who is above every name: Jesus.

Let's bless others this Christmas without expecting anything in return. Woodside, like the wise men, you are making sacrifices and blessing others. You sent Operation Christmas Child gifts around the world. Last Sunday, you assembled 4000 hygiene kits and wrapped 2000 utensils for the Trenton Area Soup Kitchen. On Friday night, a Christmas meal and worship service was celebrated with people seeking recovery in St Mark's church in Frankford. They received the Blessing Bags you filled on Advent Night. Numerous canned goods were collected for the Pennel Food Pantry and Morrisville Interfaith Food Alliance.

220 Angels from the Angel Tree sent gifts to Project TEACH (Teen Education and Child Health) – an education program for teenage parents who are encouraged to earn their high school diploma and taught parenting skills. The gifts also went to the Council of Southeast PA which provides resources and opportunities to reduce the impact of addiction, trauma and other related health issues, for the entire Bucks County community. My Growth Group helped sort toys with Toys for Tots last Monday and many other groups blessed people.

Now you can send an incredible blessing this Christmas by digging a well in a village in Mozambique, Africa. Just by completing your pledge to Woodside, we will have extra to give to install a well. A woman in Mozambique gets up before dawn, takes her 5-gal container and walks to the nearest river 2-3 miles away. Once there, she fills her container, puts the 40 pounds on her head and walks home. The water is often contaminated with typhoid fever, cholera and dysentery. She will probably have to make at least 2 trips, sometimes carrying her laundry to wash at the riverside. On average in the developing countries of Africa, women spend 60% of their day collecting water for their families' use. That leaves little time left to help with growing crops or to work at any other industry. Sadly when girls reach 6 or 7, it becomes their job to get the water. Because of this, girls often do not get to attend school. In an article, Christianity Today listed the best ways to reduce poverty. Putting a well in a village was number 1. At the same time, the average American uses 80-100 gallons of water a day. And when you turn on the hot water tap remember – that is a luxury that most of the world does not have hot or cold!

We are blessed. Let's not impress. Let's bless and take away their nightmares this Christmas.