

"IN THE DAYS OF HEROD, THE KING"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION

Yes, we're all...

"... dreaming of a white Christmas,
Just like the ones (we) used to know.
Where the tree tops glisten
And children listen to
Hear sleighbells in the snow".

Most of us are apt to feel that way at Christmas. In other words, we want to go back to Christmas past...to another Christmas in an ideal time when things were better for us and better in our world. We want to go back to a "Norman Rockwell" kind of Christmas - the warm, loving, closeknit family - probably some-time just after World War II.

Or, we want to go back to a "Currier and Ives" Christmas. That's always been one of my favorites. Snow-covered New England, sleighs drawn by horses transporting a family through the quiet countryside. The family...wrapped up snugly in blankets and Christmas gifts piled on top of them, heading for a large white house on top of a hill, glowing with the light of love. I like that idea.

Others want to go back to England and to the carolers and Tiny Tim and "God bless everybody". Still others want to go back to the old countries - Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Norway - where so many of the Christmas customs originated. "I'm dreaming of a white Christmas, just like the ones I used to know". Yes, the impulse at Christmas is to go back to a time when Christmas was celebrated in a peaceful, stable world.

BACK TO WHEN HEROD WAS KING

And that's all right. But the problem is that we stop too soon in going back through history to find the true Christmas. And so this morning I want us to go back beyond Norman Rockwell and Currier and Ives and Dickens and the old countries, back even beyond Martin Luther and the Christmas tree and St. Francis and the creche...back to the days when Herod was King.

As you know, there are two accounts of the birth of Jesus in the Gospels. One is in Luke and the other is in Matthew. In many ways they differ, dramatically sometimes in detail. Two different narratives of what happened. But in one remarkable aspect they both agree. They even agree to the exact words for they both begin the story of Christmas with these words, "In the days when Herod was King".

That's a very ominous sentence, "In the days when Herod was King". It was not the happiest of times. He was often called, "Herod, the Great" - but that wasn't the judgment of history. That's what his friends called him, and they probably knew it was good for them to do so!

HEROD / NOT A NICE MAN

Herod was not a very nice man. He was a puppet King. He did not want to be reminded of it, but it was true. He had sold out to the Romans and ruled through the good graces of Caesar Augustus. The deal was quite simple: raises taxes for Caesar and in return he would receive troops - a foreign occupation.

A puppet King and then this, too. He was not really a Jew. He was an Edomite by race. His family had converted to Judaism about a hundred years before. But the Jews...well, they hated him, despised him, to them the incarnation of all that was evil in their

And he didn't disappoint them. He came to power at the age of 25 by murdering his political rivals - the Hasmonean party. And then he bribed Marc Antony in order to get the favor of Caesar Augustus. And to prove that he was really worthy of Caesar's attention, he set about to kill all those Jewish freedom fighters, those guerilla bands that had united to throw the Roman invaders out of the country. He pursued them to the caves around the Sea of Galilee and then smoked them out, built fires in front of the entrances to the caves. And when they came out he massacred them all. Herod was not a very nice man.

And when Caesar made Herod King of the Jews...well, then he really became mean and nasty. He turned on his family. Suspecting a palace coup he murdered in succession his wife. I suppose he reasoned he could afford it since he had nine others. And then he killed two of his sons - Alexander and Aristobulus - and then 300 officers of the army.

He then turned upon the civilian population killing anybody who dared to resist him. 6,000 Pharisees refused on religious grounds to participate in the census ordered by Rome. Herod's response to this civil disobedience was to kill all the Pharisees he could find...at least a thousand of them were found.

INCIDENT IN MATTHEW

And then the incident in Matthew's Gospel that is familiar to all of us. Word came to Herod that there were some foreign agents in Jerusalem. He invited them to come to his palace and to register as such and to share their mission with him. There were three of them and they reported they were there because they believed a King was to be born in that land. All the signs were pointing to it. Herod told them to continue with their search until they found Him and then to come back to the palace and report to him that he might go and worship Him...to do this before leaving on the trip home. Otherwise, he said, you won't get to go home.

So, it's no surprise, considering of what we know about Herod the Great, that the Magi chose "to go home another way." They were no fools, in fact, they were wise men! And neither it is a surprise, considering what we know of Herod, that Herod's response to the rumor of a King being born in his land was to have all the male infants born that year in Bethlehem slaughtered. Called the "Slaughter of the Innocents", you're not likely to hear that portion of the Christmas story read in many churches at Christmas. But, dear friends, "that's the way it was" as our neighbor, Walter Cronkite use to put it.

Robinson Jeffers has captured this contrast between the sentimental picture of Christmas and the realistic picture of the world depicted in Matthew's account:

"Only an hour, only an hour from wars and confusion turn away
To the islands of old time when the world was simple and gay.
Or, so we say -
And light lay the snow on the green holly and the tall
oxen knelt at midnight
Caesar and Herod shared the world, snow over Bethlehem lay
Iron the empire, brutal the time - dark was the first
Christma Day."

NOT THE BEST OF TIMES

And so this Christmas story that begins with these words, "In the days when Herod was King" then begins to tell us something. It trying to say it was not the best of times...that Caesar and all political tyrannies didn't cease to be and Herod and inhumanity didn't disappear. Sin and all of its cruelty didn't stop. Christ was born in a bad time and the Gospel writers want us to catch that point. Yes, it was not the best of times. In fact, it was one of the worst times.

REFLECTIONS ON THIS

Let's let this fact spill over and touch us. I've heard people say things like, "Christmas isn't going to be the same this year...not like the past...it's not going to be like it was when the entire family was together". Or, "now that he's gone or mother has died....I just can't face it alone."

There was an article in the paper about this time last year that I clipped...thinking it might make its way into a sermon this year. A psychiatrist had conducted a survey and concluded that this business about the Christmas "blues" was exaggerated. His findings showed that people get no more depressed at Christmas time than they do at any other time. I don't know who he had been talking to, but my experience has been that this is a very difficult time and very stressful time for many people. It's a time when depression comes over them and they can't help it.

And I believe it's caused in part by the contrast between the present and its darkness and isolation and loneliness and incompleteness, and that time in the past - whether real or imaginary - when the family circle was unbroken and love was genuine and promises were kept and for a moment at least death and sickness were banished and war and strife suspended, and yes - "all was calm and all was bright". When we compare our present with that sentimental picture of Christmas past is it no wonder that we get depressed at this time of the year.

IF YOU ARE ONE

So, whoever you are, whatever your name...if you are one for whom this Christmas is going to be difficult, I have some news for you. So was the first Christmas. Remember that it was not the best of time when Christ was born. "Iron the empire, brutal the time. Dark was that first Christmas day". It seems to me that Luke and Matthew are trying to remind us that Christ is always born in bad times.

What's more - it says you can't stop Him from being born in bad times. That's the reason that the inn and the manger are there. The world tried to shut Him out. They said,

"Jesus...we don't have any room for you here...yet. It's too bad a time. The place is all messed up. Herod's still King. But listen...thanks anyway. It's just that, well, Jesus...frankly, your timing is off. We'll be sure to let you know when it's the right time for celebrating. No room right now for celebrating...the way things are and going..."

And so, they closed the door. And you know what happened. And this is the whole point of the Christmas story. God went sneaking around to the back and left His gift anyway, there in the barn, all wrapped up in a person. He thought...maybe they'll stumble over it. Maybe they'll find it when they go out to fetch the milk.

Be ready. This is the message of Christmas. Be ready to celebrate the birth of Christ, even though for you Herod is still King. Christ was born in a bad time and there's a message for us all in that fact.

AN ACT OF COURAGE

Now this leads me to suggest this to you that celebrating Christmas is not so much an act of sentiment on the part of faithful people as it is an act of courage - not so much a time when we celebrate the values of peace and good will, or mourn their absence from our world - as a time when in the fact of their absence, we nevertheless affirm their existence. It means working for peace in a world that seems to be more geared for war than peace. Celebrating Christmas as an act of courage is affirming peace when Herod is still alive and kicking.

Or, on a personal level, to celebrate Christmas is not longing for a time when things were better for us, but in a time and day when things are bad for us, and affirming that they're going to get better! It's an act of courage because that may mean saying "Look...I refuse to pretend that what has happened to my life really hasn't happened, but neither am I going to let it defeat me! I believe that God wants me to have a new life and I must start that journey now...like the wisemen and the shepherds - in order to find the gift. Because I know and I believe that in dark times Christ is being born".

CHRISTMAS EVE

Christmas Eve for many of us is the most sentimental time of the year. For many of us it is also one of the most courageous, too. As a minister on Christmas Eve, I sit up here and I look out over the congregation. The church is usually well filled.

There are families together - children home from school...happy families. Other families are here - mothers with their children, sitting in the same pew they have sat in for many services, only tonight they've dragged old, "What's his name..." along with them, too. He's letting it be known by the expression on his face, "Don't get your hopes up, preacher...I'm only here for tonight, and it's because this is a special night". Other families are there with grandmother. Grandmother always comes out for Christmas Eve and they always come to Church. Still others are here with small children...soon to fall asleep but kicking the pew in front of them early on. Oh, they'll wake up when it's time to light the candles and time to sing, "O Holy Night". That's why they come. They're all here...for sentimental reasons, I suppose.

But as I look out, I see others whose presence in Church on Christmas Eve is an act of courage. Widows alone, this is the first Christmas alone. Divorced families - they are present...determined not to stop being a family. And there are others...who sense that this may be their last Christmas. They don't mention it, but they know. They are all there, and I tell you, for them to stand sing:

"Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace. Hail the Son of righteousness.
Light and life to all He brings, risen with healing in his wings,
Mild he lays his glory by, born that man no more may die.
Born to raise the sons of earth, born to give them second birth."

To see them standing there...singing those words of hope, tears running down their cheeks - that's an act of courage. Because for them - Herod is still King. For them, "Brutal is the time" of their lives. But they still celebrate

Christmas because deep in their hearts they know that if Christ can be born in a stable, in the days of Herod, the King - then new life can and will be born again. Yes - even today. And as we brush up against Eternal truth once again in the days immediately ahead, may that happen to you....and receive that blessed gift, all wrapped up with love in a person.

PRAYER

O God, as we try to find our way through the world we live in, help us to remember how into our imperfect world thou didst once come - simply and gently - and how the spirit of Christ comes again and again to us and through us to other people to save their lives from sin and sickness, fear and discouragement.

O God, let this life be in us this Christmas time, that in lives that otherwise might be dark and lonely, there may be glory, joy, peace and love. In the spirit of the Child of Bethlehem, we pray. Amen.