

"THE FOURTH KING IN THE CHRISTMAS STORY"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
December 31, 1995

## "THE FOURTH KING IN THE CHRISTMAS STORY"

### INTRODUCTION

I hope you had a joyous holiday. Perhaps, however, you have moved from the anticipation of Christmas to the anxiety after Christmas. Particularly if you gained a bit of weight during this season of celebration or spent more than you planned to spend.

Julia Boynton Green spoke for many people when she wrote.

"Twas the night after Christmas and all through  
the house,  
We were paying each one for our yuletide carouse.  
I felt in my tummy a burden like lead,  
And visions of tumors careened through my head.

Martha tumbled and tossed, at last breathed with  
a sob,  
I've got pendicitos, I'm sure of it, Bob.  
I swore about sunrise, it's not worth the price.  
Believe me, next Christmas, we dine on boiled  
rice."

Some of us can relate to that. We've already signed up for Weight Watchers. No joke. This is when Diet Centers do their biggest business of the year.

Some of us can also relate to the tired mother of six wonderful but active children. After being home with them and her husband from dawn to midnight during Christmas vacation, heard the song on the radio, "I Wish It Could Be Christmas All Year Long". Well, she jumped out of her chair and despite being tired and worn down she shouted,

"Forget it. Forget it. Only a merchant would  
want it to be Christmas all year long!"

Maybe you can relate to that. Of course, people who use credit cards find that Christmas does last just about the entire year. This is all to say that in spite of the joy we all experience during the celebration of Christ's birth, there is a downside to Christmas.

### A DOWNSIDE TO CHRISTMAS

A few years ago, newspaper columnist Mike Royko shared the other side of the Christmas Story in one of his columns. He told about a stranger who put \$1,600 in gold coins in a Salvation Army kettle. The person placed the gift there quietly and anonymously. This is exactly the kind of story the print media is looking for to demonstrate the spirit of caring that Christmas brings about. Unfortunately there is a follow-up story. The local Salvation Army office began getting phone calls about the gold coins. The coins were stolen. A thief had dropped them in the kettle to get rid of them.

Royko then told another story about a man driving home from work on Christmas Eve who saw a young boy fall through the ice in a nearby lake. The man stopped his car, jumped out, tore off his jacket and crawled out onto the ice. He somehow managed to save the drowning boy. Happy ending, wouldn't you say. Unfortunately the man discovered that while he was risking his life saving the boy, a person in the crowd of onlookers stole his jacket and the envelope containing

his Christmas bonus.

There is a downside to the Christmas story - a downside generated by human sinfulness. That downside is personified in the story of the fourth king in the Christmas narrative. We all know about the three kings from the East. Wise men they are sometimes called. Our hearts are warmed as we see these three men of stature kneel before the newborn babe and offer their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. A happy ending to the story for sure, if it wasn't for the fourth king. That fourth King, of course, is King Herod.

"Go and search diligently for the child" is what Herod said to the Wise Men. "And when you have found Him, come and bring me word, that I may worship Him, too." (Matthew 2: 8)

What a sham. And what hypocrisy. Herod had no intention of worshipping the new born King. He intended, rather, to do Him harm. And thus, warned by an angel, Mary and Joseph are forced to flee in the night while the wise men, being warned in a dream, return home by another route. When Herod discovered that the Wise Men had disregarded his instructions to inform him of the whereabouts of the Christchild, he flew into a fit of rage and had his soldiers slay all of the boys under two years of age in Bethlehem and the region thereabout. What a tragic intrusion into this beautiful story of Christ's birth. All brought about by this fourth king whose name shall forever live in infamy - the name, Herod.

Strangely enough, history books call him, Herod the Great. Herod came from a powerful family. His father and grandfather were both public administrators who had widened their base of authority. Thus in the year 37 BC, Herod the Great was made King of Judea by the Romans. An imperious King, Herod promoted Hellenization among the Jews. He founded the city of Caesarea and rebuilt much of Jerusalem, including the Temple. He was a capable leader, but he was notoriously cruel. He executed three of his sons as well as his second wife. Cruelty became a family tradition. It was his son, Herod Antipas, who had John the Baptist beheaded. So we should not be surprised at Herod the Great's violent reaction when he learned that these three wise men had disobeyed him. When they did not return, Herod was so angry that he initiated what has become known as "the slaughter of the innocents" in our Christian tradition.

Some churches even today have an annual recognition of this gruesome event. The early church said that the Innocents died for Christ without understanding what was happening to them. Hence, the prayer handed down through the centuries in the Anglican Church,

"Receive.....into the arms of Your mercy all innocent victims; and by Your great might frustrate the designs of evil tyrants and establish Your rule of justice, love and peace; through Jesus Christ, our Lord....."

Certainly a tragic ending to the Christmas Story. Not only the loss of innocent life, but Mary and Joseph having to flee for their very lives to Egypt where they would await for several years the death of that cruel tyrant, Herod the Great. Herod was an unusually vindictive man, but he made the same mistakes that many people even down to this day have been known to make. Let's think about some of them.

REFUSED TO SUBMIT HIS LIFE TO A HIGHER AUTHORITY

First of all, Herod refused to submit his life to a higher authority. Herod was a tyrant. He had no regard for either God or humanity. He was a Jew, but by the end of his reign the Jews hated and despised him, even though on a material level, his rule had been quite favorable to them. His rule ended as the rule of all cruel despots end with his alienation not only from his enemies but from his family and friends as well as the people he ruled.

Herod knew that when he died, nobody would be around to shed a tear. So he had made special arrangements to guarantee that someone would grieve at his passing. According to Barclay, Herod left orders that when he died his soldiers were to round up a group of well-known citizens, frame them for some concocted crime and then kill them. That way, Herod assured himself that SOMEBODY would shed tears after his death, even if the tears weren't for him. How sad. And how tragic. But Herod was his own God. His world revolved around his own selfish concerns.

There is a character in Victor Hugo's novel, The Toilers of the Sea, named Claubert. Claubert wishes to rob a whole shipload of people, so he steers the ship onto a sandbar and gets everyone off the ship into life boats. He points to a nearby island and tells them to take the boats there. He says, "There a ship will rescue you". Wanting to appear the hero, he stays back with the ship. What he really wants to do is to rob the passengers of their possessions.

When the people are out of sight, he goes through their rooms and takes all of their money, puts it on his person, and leaps off the side of the ship. His plan is to swim a short distance to another island where he knows ships will pass by and will rescue him. The other people will be lost but he will be saved and he will have all of their money.

Loaded with cash, he leaps over the side of the ship, touches bottom and pushes off to up up to the surface. Just as he pushes off, something grabs him. It's a giant octopus. He feels its icy tentacles wrap around him, and he tries to throw them off, but as he throws off one tentacle, another one grabs him until they pull him down to death. Claubert's greed resulted in his descent into a watery grave.

King Herod was a man of greed as well. His world revolved around his own selfish desires. And his greed resulted in his descent to the depths of human cruelty. That's not unusual when you refuse to submit your life to a higher authority. We run into less powerful King Herods all the time. There are people who are tyrants in their own homes. There are people who are tyrants in the work place - who run their offices through fear and intimidation. At times, there have even been tyrants in the Church. We run into tyrants in every area of life. When our lives are centered in our own passions, when we refuse to surrender our lives to a higher authority, when we are ego-centered and not God-centered, we tend to spoil every relationship.

A certain husband was having difficulty dealing with his wife. He decided to get a divorce and sought out a lawyer for some professional advice. After telling his lawyer his side of the case, the man asked,

"What is the best thing I can do?"

The attorney replied,

"The best thing you can do is to move back in with your wife, apologize for all the harm you have done, and then work harder than ever before to make your marriage work".

After a long, deadly silence, the man inquired,

"What is the next best thing that I can do?"

Herod rejected the best for his life and for the kingdom in which he reigned. He settled for a twisted, distorted life because he lived in his own little world. He was his own god. He would not submit his life to a higher authority.

THE BETHLEHEM STAR SHOWN FOR HIM, TOO

shown also for him. You see, Herod the Great did not have to go down into history as a monster who slaughtered innocent children. There was hope for a better life even for Herod. If only he had taken the time to "look up".


Even more tragically, Herod failed to see that the Bethlehem star

J. Needleman was an observer at the launch of Apollo 17 in 1975. It was a night launch, and there were hundreds of cynical reporters all over the lawn, drinking beer, wisecracking and waiting for this 35-story high rocket. The countdown came, and then the launch. The first thing you see, according to Needleman, is this extraordinary orange light, which is just at the limit of what you can bear to look at. Everything is illuminated with this light. Then comes this thing slowly rising up in total silence, because it takes a few seconds for the sound to come across. You hear a 'WHOOOOOSH! HHHHHH-MMMM!'. It enters right into you. You can practically hear jaws dropping. The sense of wonder fills everyone in the whole place. Needleman said,

"As this thing goes up and up...the first stage ignites this beautiful blue flame. It becomes like a star, but you realize there are humans on it. And then there's total silence. People just get up quietly, helping each other up. They're kind. They open doors. They look at one another, speaking quietly and interestedly. These were suddenly moral people because the sense of wonder, the experience of wonder, had made them moral."

If only Herod had caught that sense of wonder. If only he had taken the time to look up. He might have seen the Bethlehem star and recognized that it was his hope as well as the world's hope. If only Herod had surrendered himself to the God of the stars and the God of the stable, what a different story we might have to tell. Herod the Great might have lived up to his name. His own people as well as the world in general might have called his name blessed.

But, you know, Herod's story is our story. There are some of us who are not doing too well with our relationships either. Our lives are fragmented and broken. As a result, the spiritual side of our lives is suffering. As we come to the end of this year and as we prepare ourselves for a new year, we, too, need to look up. Bethlehem's star shines also for us as well.



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I do hope you had a joyous holiday. However, resting today in the "afterglow" of Christmas, some of you may have already moved from the anticipation of Christmas to the anxiety after Christmas. Particularly if you gained a bit of weight during this season of celebration or spent a little bit more than you had planned to spend.

Julia Boynton Green spoke for many people when she penned those lines,

"Twas the night after Christmas and all through the house,  
We were paying each one for our yuletide carouse.  
I felt in my tummy a burden like lead,  
And visions of tumors careened through my head.

Martha tumbled and tossed, at last breathed with a sob,  
I've got pendicitis, I'm sure of it, Bob....  
I swore about sunrise, it's not worth the price.  
Believe me, next Christmas, we dine on boiled rice."

Some of us can relate to that. I won't ask how many of you have signed up for Weight Watchers. No joke. Believe it or not, but this is when Diet Centers do their biggest business of the year...so get in line.

Or, you may relate to the tired mother of six wonderful but active kids. After being home with them and her husband from dawn to midnight during the Christmas vacation, heard the song on the radio, "I Wish It Could Be Christmas All Year Long". Well, I understand that she jumped out of her chair and despite being tired out and worn down, she shouted for all to hear:

"Forget it. Forget it. Only a merchant would  
want it to be Christmas all year long!"

Perhaps you're feeling a bit like she did. And of course, people who use credit cards find that Christmas does last just about the entire year. This is all to say that in spite of the joy we experience during the celebration of the birth of Christ, there is a bit of a "downside" to Christmas.

### A DOWNSIDE TO CHRISTMAS

A few years ago, newspaper columnist, Mike Royko, shared this other side of the Christmas Story in one of his columns. He told about the stranger who put \$1600 in gold coins in a Salvation Army kettle. The person placed this gift there quietly and without any fanfare. This is the kind of story that the papers are looking for to demonstrate the spirit of caring that Christmas always brings. But unfortunately there was a follow-up story, too. The local Salvation Army office began to receive calls about those gold coins. Seems they had been stolen and the thief had dropped them in the kettle to get rid of them.

Then Royko told another story about a man driving home from work on Christmas Eve who saw a young boy fall through the ice of a nearby lake. The man stopped his car, jumped out, tore off his jacket and crawled out onto the ice. He somehow managed to save the drowning boy, but he later discovered that while he was out there on the ice risking his life, a person in the crowd of onlookers stole his jacket that contained his Christmas bonus of five hundred dollars. Happy ending?

There is a downside to the Christmas story...and it's a downside generated by human selfishness and sinfulness. That "downside" is seen in the story of the fourth king in our Christmas story. We all know about the three kings from the East. Wise men they were sometimes called and our hearts are warmed as we witness these three men of stature kneel before Bethlehem's manger and the newborn babe and offer their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And it would give us a happy ending for sure if it weren't for the fourth King whose name was Herod.

"Go and search diligently for the child" is what Herod said to the Wise Men. "And when you have found Him, come and bring me word that I may worship Him, too..." (Matthew 2:8)

Really, what a sham. What hypocrisy. Why Herod had no intention of worshipping the new born King. He intended, rather, to do Him harm, and thus, warned by an angel, Mary and Joseph are forced to flee in the night while the Wise Men, being warned in a dream, return home by another route. When Herod discovers that the Wise Men have disregarded his instructions to inform him of the whereabouts of the Christ child, he flies into a rage and has his soldiers go out to Bethlehem and slay all of the boys under two years of age. What a tragic intrusion into this moving and beautiful story of the birth of Christ. All of this brought about by the fourth king whose name shall live forever in infamy - the name, Herod.

Strangely enough, history books call him, Herod the Great. Now Herod came from a powerful family. His father and his grandfather were both public administrators who had widened their base of authority. Thus, in the year 37 BC, Herod the Great was made King of Judea by the Romans. An imperious King, Herod promoted Hellenization among the Jews. He founded the city of Caesarea and rebuilt much of Jerusalem, including the Temple. He was a capable leader, but he was notoriously cruel. He executed three of his sons as well as his second wife. And cruelty became a family tradition. It was his son, Herod Antipas, who had John the Baptist beheaded. Therefore we should not be surprised at Herod the Great's violent reaction when he learned that these three Wise Men had disobeyed his orders. When they did not return, Herod was so angry that he initiated what has become known as "the slaughter of the innocents" in our Christian tradition.

Some churches even today have an annual recognition of this gruesome event. Hence, the prayer handed down through the centuries and which will be offered in the Anglican churches in coming days:

"Received into the arms of Your mercy all innocent victims;  
and by Your great might frustrate the designs of evil  
tyrants and establish Your rule of justice, love and peace,  
through Jesus Christ, our Lord....."

Certainly a tragic ending to the Christmas story. Not only the loss of innocent life, but Mary and Joseph having to flee for their very lives down to Egypt where they would live for several years until news came of the death of that cruel tyrant, Herod the Great.

Herod was an unusually vindictive man, but he made the same mistakes that many people even down to this day have been known to make. Let me touch on several of them and see if they in any way touch our lives.



REFUSED TO SUBMIT HIS LIFE TO A HIGHER AUTHORITY

First of all, Herod refused to submit his

life to a higher authority. Herod was a tyrant; he had no regard for either God or humanity. He was a Jew, but by the end of his reign the Jews hated him, even though on a material level, his rule had been quite favorable to them. His rule ended as the rule of all cruel despots end with his alienation not only from his enemies but from his friends and family as well as the people he ruled.

Herod knew that when he died, there wouldn't be too many around to shed a tear and so he made special arrangements to guarantee that someone would be there to grieve at his passing. According to one historian, Herod left orders that when he died his soldiers were to round up a group of well-known citizens, frame them for some concocted crime and kill them. And that way, Herod assured himself that SOMEBODY would shed tears after his death, even if the tears weren't for him. How tragic and how sad. But Herod was his own God. His world revolved around his own selfish concerns.

There is a character in Victor Hugo's novel, The Toilers of the Sea, named Claubert. Claubert wishes to rob a whole shipload of people of their possessions and so he steers the ship onto a sandbar and gets everyone off the ship and into life boats. He points to a nearby island and tells them to take the boats there. "There will be a ship there to rescue you" he says to them. Wanting to appear to them as a hero, he stays back with the ship. What he really wants to do is to rob the passengers of their possessions which are still on the ship.

Then when the people are out of sight, he goes through their rooms and takes all of their money, puts it on his own person, leaps off the side of the ship and starts to swim a short distance to another island where he knows ships will be passing by and will rescue him. The other people will be lost but he will be saved and he will have all of their money.

And so loaded with cash, he leaps over the side of the ship...touches bottom and pushes off to the surface. Just as he pushes up and off, something grabs him. It's a giant octopus. He feels its icy tentacles wrap around him and he tries desperately to throw them off, but as he throws off one tentacle, another one grabs him until they pull him down to death. Claubert's greed resulted in his descent to a watery grave.

HEROD: A MAN OF GREED

King Herod was a man of greed as well. His world revolved around his own selfish desires and his greed resulted in his descent to the depths of human cruelty. And that's not at all unusual when you refuse to submit your life to a higher authority.

We run into less powerful King Herods all the time. There are people who are tyrants in their own homes. There are people who are tyrants in the work place and who run their offices through fear and intimidation. At times, there are even tyrants in the Church. We run into tyrants in every area of life, for when our lives are centered in our own passions, when we are ego-centered and not God-centered, we tend to spoil and to ruin many a relationship.

A certain husband was having difficulty dealing with his wife. He decided to get a divorce and sought out a lawyer for some professional advice. After sharing with the lawyer his side of the case, the man asked, "What's the best thing I can do?" The attorney replied,

"The best thing you can do is to move back in with your wife, apologize for all the harm you have done, and then work harder than ever before to make your marriage work"

After a long, deadly silence, the man then quietly asked, "And what's the next best thing that I can do?"

Herod rejected the best for his life and for the kingdom in which he reigned. He settled for a twisted, distorted life because he lived in his own little world. He was his own god. He refused to submit his life to a higher authority and ultimately he paid the price. He all do.

#### BETHLEHEM'S STAR SHOWN FOR HIM, TOO

Even more tragically, Herod failed to see that the star of Bethlehem shown also for him. Herod the Great didn't have to go down into history as a monster who slaughtered the innocent children of Bethlehem. There was hope for a better life even for Herod as there is for all of us...if only he had taken the time to "look up".

J. Needleman tells of being an observer at the launch of Apollo 17 in 1975. It was a night launch and there were hundreds of cynical reporters all over the lawn...drinking beer...wisecracking and waiting for the launching of this 35 story high rocket. Finally the countdown came and then the launch. According to Needleman, the first thing you see is this extraordinary orange light which is just at the limit of what you can bear to look at. Everything is illuminated with this light and then comes this thing slowly rising up in total silence, because it takes a few seconds for the sound to come across. You hear a 'WHOOOOSH'!....HHHHH-MMMMM'! It "enters" right into you. You can practically hear jaws dropping. The sense of wonder fills everyone in the entire place. He says,

"As this thing goes up and up...the first stage ignites this beautiful blue flame. It becomes like a star, but you realize there are humans on it. And then there's total silence. People just get up quietly, helping each other up. They're kind. They open doors. They look at one another, speaking quietly and interestedly. They were suddenly moral people because the sense of wonder, the experience of wonder, had made them moral."

CLOSING If only Herod had caught that sense of wonder. If only he had taken the time to look up. He might have seen the star of Bethlehem himself and recognized that it was his hope as well as the hope of the world. If only Herod had surrendered himself to the God of the stars and the God of the stable, what a different story we might have to tell. Herod the Great then might have lived up to his name. Why, his own people as well as the world in general might have called his name, "blessed".

You know, Herod's story is our story, too. There are some of us who are not doing too well with our relationships either. Our lives are fragmented and broken. As a result, the spiritual side of our lives is suffering. As we come to the end of another year and begin to prepare ourselves for 1996, there may be some present this morning who need to "look up" and be led by the light of Bethlehem's star for that star still shines "up there" for us as well. We read that "the Wise Men" then returned home by another way....let us pray that we may do the same.

PRAYER

For when the song of the angels is stilled,  
When the star in the sky is gone,  
When the kings and princes are home,  
When the shepherds are back with their flocks.

The work of Christmas begins:

To find the lost,  
To heal the broken,  
To feed the hungry,  
To release the prisoner,  
To rebuild the nations,  
To bring peace among people,  
To make music in the heart.

In the spirit of the Christ Child, we pray. Amen.