



Welcome, King Herod!

Herod: I appreciate the opportunity to be here. I haven't had a chance to defend myself for centuries. I've been insulted and demeaned and I am determined to set the record straight this morning.

Dan: Well thank you for being with us. You're going to have to pardon me, but how do I address you? Are you comfortable with the title "Herod the Great"?

Herod: Of course I am! The title is well deserved! I was a great builder. During the 41 years of my reign I built theaters, amphitheaters, hippodromes. I introduced athletic games in honor of Caesar. I rebuilt fortresses. You know, it was my idea to cover the temple dome in Jerusalem in gold.

Dan: Well, those are impressive accomplishments, but what about the events Matthew recorded about you? You wanted to murder infants?

Herod: You had to bring that up, didn't you? You want to skip over my great accomplishments and talk about what that no good tax collector Matthew wrote about me. Fine!

Dan: Do you remember the astrologers and the baby I'm referring to?

Herod: Of course I do, how could I forget those men who came to visit me and ask about that baby who was to come?

Dan: What did you think of them?

Herod: They asked me what they'd been asking everyone else: "Where is he who has been born King of the Jews? We've seen his star and we've come to worship him."

Dan: Did their question worry you?

Herod: More like, concerned. Frankly, I didn't know what to make of them. So I assembled the experts and asked about this Messiah. They said according to their Scriptures there was a Messiah who was to come from Bethlehem, a small village about 5 miles south of Jerusalem. None of them thought there was much credibility here and no one wanted to go there to check it out. But you can't be too careful when your power is being threatened. So I gave those astrologers instructions to go to Bethlehem and then report back to me. After a couple of weeks passed and they hadn't come back to see me, my concern turned into worry. I wondered if they'd found something ... or someone.

Dan: But King Herod, Matthew says you had the little boys around Bethlehem slaughtered. It sounds like a heartless act for a great leader to commit.

Herod: I did what anyone in power would do. One way or another you protect yourself. There were only about 40 boys there anyway. I was threatened. You do all kinds of things when you're afraid. Fear makes you strike out, doesn't it? Have you ever felt threatened by someone?

Dan: Yes I have, but I've never responded in such violence...

Herod: But you know how I felt. Listen! You ought to feel threatened now. Threatened by that baby. After all, he didn't stay a cuddly cute baby; he changed the world. I should have wiped him out when I had the chance. Not that it would have stopped him. My son, Herod Antipas, conspired with a Roman named Pilate to put him to death, and they succeeded. The 2 of them had him crucified. But they couldn't get rid of him because he came back from the dead. How do you deal with someone like that? He's a king like I could never be a king. He threatens any kingdom builder, I tell you. He's dangerous. I came to warn you. You make Christmas about that chubby man in a red suit or gift giving or holiday parties. You make Christmas into whatever you want it to be about. But you can't make Christmas all about you.

Dan: King Herod, that's what you wanted to tell us? What you really wanted to tell us?

Herod: I had my opportunity. I had my chance. My choice was clear. I always put myself at the center. Now I'm linked to that choice for eternity. I must go now. They didn't give me much time to be here. But remember Jesus makes you ask yourself, "Who is at the center of my Christmas?"

We usually try to thank our guests who share on Sundays, but in this case good riddance Herod! I think I understand what Scrooge felt like when he woke up after his encounter with the Ghost of Christmas Past. The good thing is the message of the Ghost of Herod gives us opportunity in the present to reflect on the question, "Who is at the center of my Christmas?" It's King Jesus, right? Of course we all claim our citizenship in Jesus' kingdom. We are not here this morning to question that. What I am questioning today is, Does my reality match my words? And I challenge you with the same question. Deep down, when I examine my attitudes, my priorities, my allegiances, my wants, am I really bowing to King Jesus, or do I bend my knee to another king?

The passage before us lays out the clash of these two polar opposite kingdoms. And as we dig in together we will hear in our heads the ugly shrill scraping noises of two kingdoms clashing like metal on metal. What we are experiencing is the battle over who sits on the throne of our hearts.

As we look deeper at the life and reputation of King Herod, we learn that he was born into a politically well-connected family. His father Antipater was appointed governor of Judea by Julius Caesar himself. Then Antipater appointed his son at age 25 to be the governor of Galilee. His father had some enemies of his own. He was murdered when someone poisoned his food.

He is the first of several Herods mentioned in the New Testament. Herod proved to be a good military leader, but remained totally loyal to the interests of Rome. So the Romans allowed Herod to consolidate his power and eventually become Governor of Judea. The Romans were hoping that Herod could control the Jews who lived in the area. So 35 years before Christ was born, the Roman Senate gave Herod the exclusive title, "King of the Jews." Obviously the Jews hated this title placed on a man like Herod because King Herod was anything but religious, really anything but Jewish. He was an Edomite, but he married a Jewish woman named Mariamne. It was a mixed marriage arranged by Herod designed to make him appear as an acceptable Governor to his Jewish subjects in Judea.

Historians view Herod as a clever ruler. He provided food for the poor during famines. He built theaters and sports complexes to imitate the grandeur of the great structures in Rome. To please his Roman allies he rebuilt the port city of Caesarea and named it in honor of Caesar Augustus. To please the Jews he began the reconstruction of the temple in Jerusalem. For his own enjoyment and safety along with 10,000 slaves he built the fortress of Masada along the Dead Sea. In some ways Herod was the perfect peace keeping king, but the people in his kingdom grew in their hatred of him. Why? He kept the peace and fed the people. Let's look at Matthew 2 starting in verse 1 to find out more. Fast forward to a few months after Jesus' birth. Herod the Great, King of the Jews, is slowly dying of disease. His body is racked with convulsions, his breath is foul, his skin is covered with open sores, he is losing his mind. But he is still the King. And then one day word comes to him in Jerusalem that some visitors have arrived from the East.

### **Is King Herod the Center of Your Christmas?**

**After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him" (verses 1-2).**

Who were the Magi? From Magi we get the word "magic." But don't get the wrong idea that these guys performed at parties. The Magi were considered wise men, scholars, scientists of their day. They had likely traveled a thousand miles all the way from the Persian Empire, which is in modern day Iran. We get the impression that their special field of study was the stars. They studied the stars and charted their movements. They came to believe that the positioning of stars affected or even determined what happened in the lives that lived beneath them. One day they saw a star so brilliant, so different and so amazing that the only conclusion they could come to was that the King of the Jews had been born.

How could someone outside the Jewish faith, someone who was an outsider look at a bright star a thousand miles away and conclude this is about Jesus? We don't exactly know, but 600 years

earlier the prophet Daniel lived among the Persian people. We know from the book of Daniel that he was not a shrinking violet when it came to sharing his faith. He was a man of God and not afraid to tell others about the God he served. We also know that Daniel was put in charge of the wise men in the Persian king's court. No doubt Daniel shared Old Testament prophecies. These were passed down from generation to generation of Magi. And when they saw this star it was like no other they had seen. This star was lit up by the Glory of God. These wise men were seeking something they didn't have, so they mounted camels and followed the star until it led them to Jerusalem. We don't know how many there were, or how many servants came along. It must have taken at least three months of hard travel over some of the worst desert on the planet to get to Jesus.

### **When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, (v. 3).**

The famous Jewish historian named Josephus tells us more about Herod. King Herod was addicted to power. If power were an alcoholic drink, Herod was passed out on the floor drunk with it. The Bible links power more often than not to sin. He brutally held on to his position. He had the high priest, the brother of his wife drowned because he appeared to be a threat. Then he forced his Jewish wife to kill herself. He murdered two of his own sons when they posed a threat to his power. Five days before his own death he had a third son murdered.

Herod the Great was addicted to possessions. When I was in Israel, it seemed like every where we turned there was some kind of archeological dig to explore that was ruins from one of Herod's building projects. I remember summer palaces, open air theaters, cisterns and canals for drinking and bathing, a commercial harbor. One place there was a mound of dirt 500 feet in elevation built by slaves. Why? Just so the King of the Jews could show off his power. I saw the ruins of a hippodrome for chariot races that seated 300,000 people. He had more property and buildings than Donald Trump!

Herod the Great was addicted to prestige. He was married a total of 10 times. Likely each was for political gain. He was a smooth talker who valued making an impression. He craved the approval he received from his Roman superiors. One might argue that King Herod the Great actually did some good things for his constituency. After all he kept the people safe from foreign invaders. Crime was down. He built fun theaters. He made sure the chariots ran on time and the toilets flushed. People were not going hungry. So not all bad as long as you didn't cross him.

Herod the Great was paranoid. Learning from his father's murder, Herod had his own food tasters. He built several emergency fortresses to flee when there were threats. Masada was practically impregnable. He established a ruthless spy network. Anyone who opposed him would end up taking a midnight swim in the Sea of Galilee with cement slippers.

**... and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born (verses 3-4).**

This is fascinating to me. The Magi, the outsiders, came 1,000 miles to worship the king of the Jews. These insider chief priests and teachers who knew these prophecies like they knew their home addresses seemed so indifferent to the whole thing. They were either really benefiting from bowing to Herod or they were scared of what a jealous Herod might do if they showed any interest in the prophecy about the Messiah. So Herod goes to these chief priests and teachers and asked them what was going on. Where was this messiah to be born? He found out it was right in his own backyard.

**"In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel'" (verses 5-6).**

Now things were getting serious. Maybe these strangers know something. What if this boy they are looking for is the One the Bible predicted? He must take him out now.

**Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him" (verses 7-8).**

Herod had no intention of worshipping him. Herod was trying to steal Christmas, and when that didn't work he was going to try to kill Christmas. So we go back to our original question. Of course Jesus is at the center of my Christmas! How could I ever have a crazy evil guy like Herod at the center of my Christmas? Why even ask the question? In fact as I look closer at this King Herod the more I realize I'm closer to him than I ever wanted to admit. Given the right situation, every one of us is capable of bowing to King Herod if it means getting what we want. A little Herod comes out in me when I would rather rule than serve, or when I focus on what I own or want to buy rather than what I can give, or when I'd rather be honored than look for ways to honor others, or when I see others as a threat instead of as people who matter to God.

Something about Herod is, he got it. For all his depravity, for all his malice, for all of bitterness, his paranoia, the guy got it. He understood. You can't both be king and at the same time have **him** king. You can't be on the throne and at the same time have **him** on the throne. It's not going to work. It's one or the other, so if I am not going to repent, I will destroy my rival.

The story switches back to the Magi, the outsiders. These guys were walking illustrations of the reach of God's mercy and grace.

For all of us oddballs, sinners, undeserving, God chooses them, leads them, and draws them and they respond and seek God. God used the very thing they worshipped—a star—to lead them to the one worthy of their worship. Think about the mercy in this: God uses our idols to lead us to Christ. God is very creative. He is very good.

He not only uses a star, he also uses the Holy Scripture. It's the Bible and not just signs and wonders that lead people to Christ. Over and over again we see that it's the outsiders, the pagans, that are the people God who first realize their need for his grace. From the very beginning, this Christmas story is an announcement that God's grace is for all people on the face of the earth. Christmas is an invitation to bow down before the throne of Grace.

### **Or is King Jesus the Center of Your Christmas?**

**After they had heard the king, 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 (verses 9-11).**

These first Christmas gifts were expensive but there was more to them than meets the eye. First they presented **Gold**, one of the rarest and most expensive metals. It represented the wealth and power of a king. With their gold they worshipped Jesus as King. Then they presented **Frankincense**. This was incense used in temple worship. The high priests would burn incense as they prayed for God to intervene. Interesting, incense was never used in prayers for forgiveness of sins. It seems these guys knew that the messiah was without sin. They worshipped Jesus not just as king but also for his Holiness. This gift pointed to their understanding that this baby was God. Then they presented **Myrrh**. Myrrh was used in death. It was a spice used to embalm bodies. Nicodemus used 100 pounds of Myrrh to embalm Jesus' body after his death. This was not a baby shower gift. This was a gift of faith, faith that Jesus would be the sacrifice to finally and fully atone for their sins. If we are serious about King Jesus being at the center of our Christmas, we can learn a lot from these Magi.

How do we manage the gold? If we want less of King Herod and more of King Jesus we learn to turn over ownership of everything to Jesus. The items on the ledger of our checkbooks and credit card statements truly shape and define of our worship. Jesus said, "Where your treasure is there your heart is also."

The Lord said to Moses, "You shall have no other gods before me." Worship that pleases God is based on the genuine desire to have God directing things in our lives. We make very poor kings! When we hold on to the throne to which we are not entitled it doesn't lead to good things. Think about these Scribes in this passage. They had the knowledge. They instructed Herod directly

from the Scriptures. But there was no desire to obey his word. There was no life to them. No hunger to worship. No hunger to be in the presence of God. They missed Christmas.

One of the strengths of CPC is the commitment to teach the scriptures, to impart the truth in a way we can all understand. But it goes beyond that. Applying what we know is a sweet aroma of worship. We all know what body odor is. When you have a good sweat doing something worthwhile, you don't care what your wife says...you just happily hop in the shower knowing that that fragrant aroma was do to fruitful labor. Likewise, the Church Body is focused on what is worthwhile we begin as a church to reek of our own special odor. Service to God and surrender to him as King puts out our own special odor. The prayers of people at South Campus put out a special odor. May those who we come in contact with us smell our church body odor of our obedience to God.

Myrrh is not only a symbol pointing to Christ's death, it's also a symbol pointing to my own spiritual death. Before Christ saved me, my sin had me embalmed in a tomb. But when I received Christ, when I trusted in his death for my sins, I was brought us out of the spiritual grave and into new life. So wise worshippers understand our worship is to the one who died for us. Wise worshippers understand that as Christ was raised from the dead, so we will rise with him. And wise worshippers understand that God continually reveals new stuff we are to die to as we keep Christ at the center of our Christmas. So the last thing we read before these Magi disappear from scripture is verse 12.

**And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.**

So what happened to Herod? When I look at Herod, I see more than a Grinch who tried to steal Christmas. I see a man who couldn't steal it, so he tried to kill it.

**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. Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: "A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more" (verses 16–18).**

At the end of the story of the Nativity, after the angels go back to wherever they came from, after the shepherds go home and the wise men and the baby Jesus and his family head for Egypt

as refugees, we hear the screams of mothers weeping for their babies. Herod had joined the ranks of Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot, Mao. The world calls it Iraq, Syria, Nigeria, Chad, Paris, San Bernardino. The Bible just calls it Bethlehem. Our noses get rubbed in all the blood, pain and sorrow right there in the little town of Bethlehem. How still we see thee lie? Not hardly. The Christmas story, the clash of kingdoms, rips at our warm Christmas traditions. And even though this isn't the Christmas story we want, it may be the Christmas story we need, because any God, any King who is unwilling to come to Bethlehem won't do us much good. If any God is going to save us, He will have to come down, down to where we are, because we can never get up to God.

So we know who belongs at the center of our Christmas. It's Christ. It's love that came down from heaven. It's Immanuel, God with us. And those other gods that we inclined to place on the throne of our lives—Nature, Pleasure, Technology, Money, Success, Praise of Men, Self Importance—won't go away without a fight.

At Bethlehem we see a prelude to events that will take place later at a place just up the road called Calvary. The one true King of the Jews goes head to head with our kings and our kingdoms, our politics, our power, our spiritual strongholds, and there is pain and violence, and there is weeping and there is blood. At last Herod seems to get his way with Mary's baby. And Matthew tells us this was for us and our salvation. All in the name of love for all of us. And it began in Bethlehem.

*I heard the bells on Christmas day their old familiar carols play, and wild and*

*Sweet the words repeat of peace on earth, good will to men.*

*I thought how, as the day had come, the belfries of all Christendom had rolled*

*Along the unbroken song of peace on earth, good will to men.*

*And in despair I bowed my head; "there is no peace on earth," I said, "for hate*

*Is strong and mocks the song of peace on earth, good will to men."*

*Then pealed the bells more loud and deep; "god is not dead, nor doth he sleep;*

*The wrong shall fail, the right prevail, with peace on earth, good will to men."*

We know who belongs at the center of our Christmas. It is the true King of the Jews. If we miss that, we miss Christmas. And when we miss Christmas we are left with more questions than answers. More despair than hope. More violence than peace. More emptiness than contentment.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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