**Let’s Keep Herod in Christmas**

**The 4th King**

January 1, 2017

New Year’s Day

1st Sunday After Christmas

1st Presbyterian Church

Pittsford, New York

Isaiah 63:7-9

Psalm 148

Hebrews 2:10-18

Matthew 2:13-23

Ecclesiastes 3:1-13

Psalm 8

Revelation 21:1-6a

Matthew 25:31-46

*Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.*

 -Matthew 2:13b

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t’s said that in Rome, on New Year’s Eve, there is a tradition of literally throwing old things right out the window, to start the New Year free from the past. When I read about this tradition I considered that it might be good to stay away from multi-level apartment buildings in Rome on New Year’s Eve.

According to writer Patricia Farris, it is a little different in Mexico. One New Year’s Eve, she and her husband were in Mexico. It was late in the evening, not yet midnight, and the central square of the village they were visiting was full of people, lights, music, kids, old people, families . . . At make-shift stands people were selling, in addition to all the usual souvenirs and food an array of inexpensive pottery, mostly simple clay plates. What was interesting was that people were buying the plates and then standing back and throwing them with full force against the side wall the great cathedral that stood in the town square, smashing the plates into smithereens.

It was loud and raucous and exciting, according to Ms. Farris. Only later did she learn that this tradition grew out of a deep human need to throw out the old, to start the New Year free of old resentments, old fears, old prejudices, old sins. “Throw them out!” says Patricia Farris, “Let them smash against the strong fortress of faith and be done with it. God is ready to offer healing and new life.”

But for those in the church we say, “Welcome to worship on this first Sunday of a New Year.” Maybe someone here has come to receive healing and new life.

Some of us probably stayed up late last night. It hardly seems possible that all over the country only about a week ago, were putting on Christmas pageants to tell the story of the nativity. The cast of characters may vary, but always there are three individuals at the heart of the story: Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus. Angels and shepherds come and go, in various numbers. Wise men may show up bearing gifts -- or, they may hold off until Epiphany. There may be an assortment of barnyard animals, either real or portrayed by kids in costume. There may even be an innkeeper to say "Sorry, no vacancy!" and slam the door.

**The missing person in the pageant**

Yet, there's one figure from the biblical narrative you'll rarely see portrayed in a children's Christmas pageant: King Herod. He's just too mean and nasty for that holy night.

It's common, from Christmas Eve to Epiphany, to read the story from Matthew about how wise men came to the court of King Herod, asking where they could find the child born King of the Jews. Herod, of course, was the real, live king of the Jews. But he was too crafty a politician to show his hand too soon. There was intelligence to be gathered -- and if these naïve foreigners could be enlisted as spies to lead him to this King of the Jews, so much the better. He sort of wondered if his security protection had been hacked. This paranoid King had his palace closest advisors consult with religious leadership who scoured through scripture to find any indications about the arrival of a new king or about the appearance of a star.

Fortunately, the visitors from the east were not slackers in the intelligence department. They could see right through Herod's smarmy hospitality. They returned to their own country "by another way." That's where our Christmas Eve reading from Matthew typically ends.

It's only Part 1, though, of a two-part story. Nobody ever wants to read the second part on Christmas Eve, because the details are so horrific. Wise men dropping off baby presents is one thing. What comes next is rated "R" for intense violence. Not the kind of thing we want our children to hear before heading back home to put out a late-night snack for Santa. Visions of sugarplums were about to be replaced by bloody nightmares.

Herod is enraged to learn the magi have given him the slip. And so, he sent his storm troopers out to commit an atrocity worthy of Hitler's SS. They were to break into every Jewish home in the region around Bethlehem, pull every male baby from the arms of their mothers and cut their little throats.

Believe it or not, there's a Christmas carol about this woeful business. It's called the Coventry Carol. Ironically, it has one of the most achingly beautiful melodies of all Christmas music. The words are a melancholy lullaby, sung by grieving mothers to their dead children:

*Herod the king, in his raging,
Charged he hath this day,
His men of might, in his own sight,
All young children to slay.
Then woe is me, poor child for thee
And ever mourn and say
For thy parting, nor say nor sing
By, by, lully, lullay.*

What part does this dark episode have to play in the bright and joyous tale of Christmas? It's a discordant note, struck in the closing bars of a beautiful melody. Until now, everything has been sweetness and light. But then, the fists of Herod's soldiers are pounding on Bethlehem's doors. The mothers of the City of David weep their bitter tears, and cradle their lifeless babes in their arms:

*Lullay, Thou little tiny child,
By, by, lully, lullay.*

Herod -- at this point a bitter old man, in the final year of his 41-year reign -- was fully capable of playing a role in such atrocities.

Herod was king in name only. Everyone knew that. It was the Romans who really called the shots. Herod's job was to do the imperial dirty work, subduing a rebellious colony on behalf of the emperor. That task he performed with relish.

During the course of his reign, Herod had at least nine wives and 14 children. Perhaps more. There were probably more, but daughters' births were not always recorded. He put one of his wives, Mariamne I, on trial for adultery. Chief witness for the prosecution was Mariamne's own mother -- who, it's said, testified against her daughter only because she feared for her own life. Herod executed his wife, which led her mother to declare herself queen, charging that Herod was mentally unfit to rule. Not a wise decision on her part. Herod put her to death without a trial. Talk about a dysfunctional family!

There's more. There were two young sons remaining from Herod's marriage to Mariamne. As they grew older, the king considered them threats to his power. He sought to put them on trial for treason, but Emperor Augustus put a stop to that by ordering the sons and the father to reconcile. A few years later, Herod outmaneuvered the emperor. He sent a huge financial donation to revive the Olympic Games, something Augustus very much wanted. In exchange, the emperor allowed Herod to execute his two sons. Later, though, he was heard to mutter, "I would rather be Herod's dog than Herod's son."

But that's still not all. After murdering his wife and his two sons, Herod named his eldest son, Antipater -- a child of a different mother -- the exclusive heir to the throne. But Herod never could tolerate a rival. He grew jealous of his latest crown prince. He put him on trial for treason like the others and had him executed. The emperor was so appalled that he refused to allow any of Herod's remaining sons to claim the title of king -- although three of them would eventually rule as "tetrarchs," each governing one-third of his father's realm.

Thirty-three years later, one of them, Herod Antipas, would look upon Jesus at last, as he stood before him in chains, wearing a crown of thorns.

We don't know when it was, exactly, that the magi stopped by the palace to pay their courtesy call, but it was probably during this last, turbulent year of Herod's life, the year he executed his third son. Can any of us doubt, now, that this man was capable of dispatching soldiers to kill babies?

Jesus, of course, escaped that fate. An angel of the Lord came to Joseph in a dream, warning him to take his little family and flee to Egypt. There they probably settled in the thriving Jewish quarter of Alexandria, a great center of learning. It's possible Jesus spent his early years there, and learned Talmud from the distinguished rabbis of that city.

Surely some of us find it troubling that God sends an angel to rescue Jesus, but permits those other little babies die. It's another facet of the thorny theological problem we face so often in this world: the problem of evil, the question of why a just and all-powerful God allows human suffering to take place. There's no easy answer to that philosophical question, but King Herod does seem well-suited to play the role of evil incarnate.

So, what's the takeaway? Should we reserve a role for Herod in next year's Sunday school Christmas pageant?

*Relax.* It's a rhetorical question! Herod doesn't belong in a children's Christmas play. But that doesn't mean we should forget about him entirely.

Herod's important to the Christmas story because *he helps us remember the kind of world in which we live and why this world still needs a savior.* Even if we all had a fine Christmas, there are plenty of neighbors on this planet whose lives are tainted with suffering -- people for whom the least of their worries is whether or not they managed to get into the Christmas spirit.

What about those hordes of desperate Syrian refugees who have swelled the population of Europe -- and the small trickle who have been so fortunate as to be resettled in the United States or Canada? A significant number of these refugees are Christians, members of some of the oldest churches in the world. They're wondering if they will ever return to the land of their ancestors -- and whether those ancient churches will ever again resound with Christian hymns. What kind of Christmas did they have this year?

Then there are those who are afflicted by poverty here. Sure, lots of our neighbors "had themselves a merry little Christmas," but a great many more find themselves far removed from the vision of perfection and peace portrayed on so many of our Christmas cards.

Jesus didn't come into the world to bring us a mid-winter festival of peace and contentment. He wasn't born into a placid Christmas-card scene, but rather into the sort of world where families wander homeless and corrupt tyrants rule by deceit.

Jesus didn't come to offer respite from the world. He came to save it.

As for us -- his Christmas-weary disciples -- we have a role in carrying out that mission, using the spiritual gifts he's given us, along with whatever material resources we have at our disposal.

If we strive to keep Herod in Christmas, maybe it will be just a little easier to remember that mission -- don't you think?

**Commentary on this passage from Matthew**

The stories of the birth of Jesus are so completely merged in the minds of most modern believers that it is rarely noted that the two gospels that speak of his birth, Matthew and Luke, tell widely divergent stories of the birth of Jesus. So synthesized have these gospel accounts become that it is hard to find a Christmas pageant that does not have shepherds and wise men, stars and angels. While both Matthew and Luke provide their readers with a genealogy of Jesus (1:2-17; Luke 3:23-38), and testify to his being born in Bethlehem prior to moving to Nazareth (2:1; Luke 2:4), each presents a unique sequence of events, which, when viewed separately, reveal some interesting differences.

Luke's gospel includes the lengthy story of John the Baptist's birth, Gabriel's annunciation to Mary, Mary's meeting with Elizabeth (Luke 1:5-80), the angel's appearance to the shepherds, and Mary and Joseph's presentation of the child Jesus in the temple (Luke 2:8-38). Rather than an angelic visit to Mary, however, Matthew describes an angel's message to Joseph in a dream, followed by the journey of the magi in response to the appearance of the star, the magi's conversation with Herod, their worship of the child, the slaughter of the innocents, and the holy family's flight into Egypt, precipitated by yet another revelation to Joseph in a dream (1:18-2:23). If one consciously tries to combine the time lines of these two stories, however, problems arise.

According to Matthew, Mary and Joseph flee with Jesus to Egypt almost immediately after his birth. Yet according to Luke, they are in Jerusalem at the temple eight days after the birth, presenting Jesus for circumcision, and they journey home to Nazareth as soon as the required rituals are completed (Luke 2:22-40). According to Matthew, however, the family remains in Egypt until the death of Herod, when the third and fourth of Joseph's dreams reveal to him that it is now safe to return with the child to Nazareth (2:19-23). The fact that Herod the Great is believed to have died in 4 B.C. has prompted many to suppose that the current placement of the birth of Christ four years after Herod's death is an error created by ancient revisions in the calendar.

Although there is no completely satisfying way to reconcile this problem, or to completely harmonize the differences in the gospel accounts of Jesus' birth and early childhood, Matthew and Luke agree on the most important of their common themes: the miraculous birth of Christ, the evident fulfillment of Scripture through the details of his birth, and the careful preservation of the child and his family ensured by God during these vulnerable years.

One of the most interesting aspects of Matthew's narrative is the prominent role of Joseph as the conduit through whom God's messages of instruction and warning come. Four times he is visited in a dream, no doubt reminding Jewish hearers of the two great northern patriarchs of the OT, Jacob and Joseph, who often communicated with God through dreams (Genesis 28:10-22; 31:10-13; 37:5-11; 40:1-41:36). Of all these references, it is very interesting to note that like the NT Joseph, Jacob once received instructions in a dream to return home after a sojourn in a foreign country (Genesis 31:10-13; Matthew 2:19-23). While this is an interesting similarity, the connections between the OT Joseph and the NT Joseph go beyond the simple presence of dreams in both their narratives.

It is on the basis of the patriarch Joseph's sojourn in Egypt and the subsequent settlement and captivity of the Israelites there that requires God, in the later generation of Moses, to call his son, Israel, out of Egypt again -- a fact echoed by Hosea 11:1 and quoted by Matthew 2:15 in connection with the holy family's flight. It is also Joseph the patriarch who is understood as the father of the northern kingdom tribes represented by his sons Ephraim and Manasseh (Genesis 48). He is the child of Rachel (Genesis 30:22-24), and so his children, the members of the northern tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh, are those same children for whom Rachel weeps when the northern kingdom falls, according to Jeremiah 31:15-16. The image of the weeping matriarch of Israel is applied to the slaughter of the innocents in Matthew 2:16-18, but it still evokes an image of the ruin of the house of Joseph, and juxtaposes this destruction with the escape and survival of the new Messiah, protected this time by his father Joseph, in a way that the first children of Joseph were not protected.

Perhaps these echoes of the northern patriarchal traditions of the OT Joseph are sounded by Matthew because he is building toward his explanation of why Jesus was raised in the north and not in Bethlehem. According to Matthew, Joseph discovers in his fourth dream that although Herod is dead, his equally oppressive son Archelaus had been placed in charge over Judah, making that southern region too dangerous for the child Jesus. To underscore that his change of residence was preordained by God, however, Matthew invokes a prophecy which only he finds in Isaiah 11:1, declaring that Jesus' eventual residence in the northern city of Nazareth identifies him as the messianic "branch" (Hebrew *netzer*) of David's royal house.

There would have been no doubt in the minds of Jesus' contemporaries that he was more a citizen of Galilee -- viewed by many as a pagan territory, Galilee of the Gentiles -- than he was of Jerusalem or Judah, where one would expect to find a messianic descendant of David. Reminding his hearers of the intimate relationship between God and David's *northern* ancestor Jacob, and the northern patriarch Joseph, would have served Matthew's rhetorical purposes well -- concerned as he was that Jewish hearers come to understand Jesus as the legitimate Jewish Messiah.

In truth, northern Israelite traditions comprised much of what we now have in the stories of Genesis and Numbers, as well as the entirety of the book of Deuteronomy. Samuel, the great prophet, to whom Luke likens Jesus (Luke 2:40; 1 Samuel 2:26), was from the tribe of Ephraim and a resident of Ramah, the town in which Rachel's weeping can be heard according to Jeremiah. By raising all these references to northern traditions, it is as if Matthew is reminding his Jewish hearers that God initially blessed the northern citizens of Israel with numerous direct revelations from God through great anointed leaders long before the days of David and his royal house. Why, then, should not the Messiah appear in the north?