

Let's Keep Herod in Christmas *Matthew 2:1-23* | 1/1/2017

I am sure that sometime this season you heard the phrase: "Let's keep Christ in Christmas!" It's a popular slogan, glimpsed on many a bumper or billboard. Some people have their own variant, as they demand store clerks say "Merry Christmas" rather than "Season's Greetings" or "Happy Holidays." "Yes," they say, "let's enjoy Santa, Frosty the Snowman and all the other second-tier Christmas characters. But let's never forget the true reason for the season: the birth of Jesus Christ." Who could argue with that?

But do any of us really think, though, there's a danger of losing Jesus amidst the wrapping paper and the wreaths? *Really?* Sure, a huge, commercial holiday has just rolled over us. The retail juggernaut has little to do with the babe in the manger. But isn't his place there pretty secure, even so?

All over the country, children of church families have recently put on Christmas pageants that 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.

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, on Christmas Eve, as well as on 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.

Fortunately, the visitors from the east aren't slackers in the intelligence department. They can see right through Herod's hypocritical hospitality. They return to their own country "by another way." That's where our Epiphany 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 sort of thing we want little kids to hear before heading back home to leave milk and cookies out for Santa. Visions of sugarplums could be replaced by bloody nightmares.

Herod is enraged to learn the magi have given him the slip. And so he sends his soldiers out to commit an atrocity worthy of Hitler's SS. They are to break into every Jewish home in the region around Bethlehem and slaughter every male child under the age of 2.

We've sung a Christmas carol about this. It's called the Coventry Carol, and we will sing it again today during communion. 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.

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.

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. 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, Augustus was heard to mutter, "I would rather be Herod's dog than Herod's son."

After murdering his wife and his two sons, Herod named his eldest remaining son, Antipater, the exclusive heir to the throne. But Herod never could tolerate a rival. He put him on trial for treason 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, 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 the 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 lets 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 every 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 what kind of world we live in 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 in this city. Sure, lots of our neighbors "had themselves a merry little Christmas," but a many find themselves far removed from the vision of perfection and peace portrayed on so many sparkly 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 murder and deceit.

Jesus didn't come to offer respite from the world. He came to save it. As for us, 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 to save his children in this world.

If we strive to keep Herod in Christmas, maybe it will be just a little easier to remember that mission.

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