

The Man Who Would Be King

In the name of him sent to redeem those under the law, dear friends in Christ: From the highest of highs to the lowest of lows. So it goes. A few days ago we celebrated the wondrous story of the Savior's birth, what with Mary and Joseph and the Christ Child in the manger, the adoring shepherds, and the sounds of heavenly voices: angels singing glory to God in the highest. Today we go from that joyful, heartwarming scene to a heart wrenching spectacle of horror: the slaughter of the Bethlehem infants, their tiny, bloody corpses held to the breasts of their wailing mothers who refuse to be comforted, the voice of anguish and lamentation prophesied by Jeremiah, Rachel weeping for her children because they are no more. If nothing else it's a heavy dose of reality. The Savior wasn't born into an earthly paradise that welcomes him with open arms, but rather into a dark, loveless world that's opposed to him and that seeks to destroy him.

In today's lesson it's one particular person who sought to destroy him. So, allow me to introduce you to the monster behind the massacre: he is Herod I, also known as Herod the Great. He is, as the title of this message suggests, the man who would be king – and specifically, he wanted to be King of the Jews.

Which should have counted him out for the position because he wasn't of the royal house of David (or any other royal family for that matter). To be sure, he wasn't even a Jew. He was instead an Edomite, a distant descendant of Jacob's brother Esau, a member of a people with a 2000 year history of unfriendly and often openly antagonistic relations with the Jews. But when Herod came along, it had been a long time since anyone had claimed the title "King of the Jews". For some six centuries the land had been ruled over by foreign empires that appointed the persons who governed for them. First Babylonians, then Persians, Greeks, and finally in the century before Christ the Romans conquered the land of Judah. And it happens that the Herod family had friendly relations with the Romans, particularly with Julius Caesar and later Mark Antony. They began serving the Romans by successfully tax-farming most of Palestine for them. They were good at it, which pleased the Roman Senate. And Herod was an ambitious opportunist who knew how to put himself out there and take credit for things – even things he wasn't responsible for. He also knew how to make his rivals look bad, which he did with cold calculation. The upshot is that after a long PR campaign and a lot a political razzle-dazzle, he managed to get himself appointed the Roman's client ruler in the region. As he had long desired, the Roman Senate granted him the title "King of the Jews".

But Herod had other ambitions. It wasn't enough for him have become a self-styled king. No, Herod wanted greatness. He wanted to be remembered. He wanted to be honored and loved by his subjects. To achieve this he set about hundreds of massive construction projects. His main focus in Jerusalem was a complete overhaul and expansion of the Temple and its surrounding courts and other buildings. This was aimed at pleasing his Jewish subjects who generally resented his title and distrusted him. But he had many pagan subjects too. For them he built theaters and arenas for games and Roman style public baths – which the Jews were opposed to; but Herod was trying to make everyone happy. For himself he built palaces and fortresses throughout the land. In what was something of a masterpiece of ancient engineering, he also built the man-made port at the coastal city he renamed Caesarea to honor his Roman overlord.

The problem was that all these building projects were very expensive. To pay for them Herod had to raise taxes – which were already high due to the vast sums that were annually sent to Rome as tribute. To extract these exorbitant taxes from his reluctant citizens, Herod had to resort to increasingly harsh measures, which in turn made him even less popular. But Herod hated the idea that his subjects might be speaking ill of him, so he created a secret police force that arrested anyone who criticized him. Such people were severely punished. Oddly enough, this made Herod even more unpopular.

Herod's personal life was complicated. He had ten wives that we know of, and probably twice that many concubines in his royal harem. These gave him lots of children. And more reasons to spend the taxpayer's money. It's hard to say where Herod stood religiously. Outwardly he professed the faith of the Jews, but his commitment to it was weak at best. It seems to have been more politically motivated.

And then there was his paranoia. I guess when you come into kingship by hook and by crook as Herod did, you're always wondering who might be out there plotting to get your job by the same means. Certainly this was true for Herod. So, to defend against assassination, he kept a personal bodyguard of 2000 soldiers. Over the years at least three of his sons and one of his wives were executed, allegedly for conspiring to take his throne. As he got older and had to face his own mortality, his paranoia only increased; which might help explain his frame of mind when the wise men showed up asking where the newborn King of the Jews was. Then Herod knew there was a contender for his throne – one who just might be legitimate, unlike him.

But before we get to that part of the story, there's something that needs to be pointed out. Herod was a man who wanted to be a king. And the whole purpose of wanting to be king is to exercise authority. He wanted to be in charge, subject to no one and to no thing. Herod achieved his dream: he became a king, "King of the Jews". But he didn't get what he was really after. He wasn't in charge. He was a subject of Rome, and had to please his Roman masters or lose his job and title. He was a servant to his ego and his desire to be honored and loved by his subjects; but the things he did to make himself more popular with them only made them hate him more. He was slave to his fears, which alienated him even farther from people – even the members of his own family whom he never trust. And, of course, he was a slave to sin: his selfish prideful ambition that motivated him to do the things he did but never delivered the hoped for goal. Why, it almost makes you feel sorry for the guy; but don't. Near the end of his life, Herod knew very well where he stood in the hearts of his subjects, and so he compiled a list of several hundred leading citizens who were to be executed upon his death. In this way Herod meant to ensure that when he died there would be weeping and mourning in the land. Happily, when it happened, these executions were not carried out. Dead kings have no authority to enforce their will.

All right, now that we've met the monster, the man who would be king, let's return to today's text. Our best guess puts the birth of Jesus in the year 6 BC, and Herod died in 4 BC. This means that when Jesus was born, Herod was near the end of his life and at the height of his paranoia. A caravan of wealthy wise men from lands far to the east shows up in Jerusalem one day. They're asking, "Where is he who is born King of the Jews? We saw his star rise in the east, and we have come to worship him." Naturally, they inquire at Herod's palace. Where else would you look for a newly born royal prince? The wise men couldn't know it, but it's been a long time since Herod has fathered any children. But Herod does know this. And he suspects this is something bigger. He is familiar enough with the Jewish faith to know they are expecting a Messiah, a Savior God promised long ago, one who is to be a king who will rule forever on the throne of his ancestor, David. This greatly worries Herod. He believes he has on hand a

legitimate contender for his throne. He can't have that. And he foolishly imagines he can thwart the plans and purposes of God. So, he summons the religious scholars to inquire where, according to the Scriptures, the Christ is to be born. Quoting from the prophet Micah, they tell him Bethlehem – which is only a couple hours walk away from Jerusalem.

Herod returns to the wise men, telling them to go search for the child in Bethlehem. "When you find him, send word to me. I'd like to come worship him too." Well, not exactly. But it is what he said.

As you know, the wise men do go to Bethlehem and find the Christ Child. They worship him and present their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. But then they are warned by God in a dream not to return to Herod. He means the child harm. So they go back to their home country without stopping by Jerusalem.

Meanwhile, Herod waits. Joseph has his divinely inspired dream that tells him to pack up the family and head for Egypt. This is for their safety, and also to fulfill the prophecy of Hosea through whom the Lord declared "Out of Egypt I have called my Son". There's something strangely ironic going on here too. It's almost like a reverse exodus. Way back when, it was an Egyptian king who had ordered the killing of the infant sons of Israel. Now Egypt is a place of refuge for the Holy family from an ostensibly Jewish king who is ordering the same thing.

This is, as we heard, what Herod does. When he realizes that he's been deceived by the wise men, in a clumsy attempt to destroy the Christ Child he orders the slaughter of all the male children in and around Bethlehem who are two years old or younger. It is a horrific crime that displays the atrocious, insane lengths to which the sinful soul will go defend itself from a perceived threat.

Okay. What do we make of this tragic account? Three things come to mind. First, that God's plans cannot be thwarted; not by sinners or Satan and all his evil angels combined. God's promises and purposes in Christ will be fulfilled. He saved his Son from this threat of death in order that his Son might save us all by facing an even more horrible death on the cross when he gave his life for our sin.

Second, that God does not restrain all the evil things that people do. A typical reaction to this story is "Couldn't the Lord have saved all those little boys in Bethlehem? And if so, then why didn't he?" The answer is that yes, of course he could have saved them. And ultimately he did save them as the passage from Jeremiah that was quoted continues telling the typological Rachel to stop weeping because her children will be returned to her – speaking of the resurrection. Death is not the worst thing that can happen to someone. These boys were lost in time, but not in eternity. They have long since been reunited with their grieving families, who see things in an entirely different light now. But for this time in this fallen world, yes, we all face losses and sorrows because of people's sins. And others suffer because of our sins. The Lord does not restrain every evil. Think about it. If he did, we wouldn't be allowed to do anything because we all do evil things and even our best actions are tainted by evil.

Still, someone will say, but murdering little boys? How can God allow that? Well, let me ask you, how is what Herod did in his effort to stay in power different than any politician in our country today who says, "I'm personally opposed to abortion; but for political reasons – namely that I can't be elected if I oppose it – I won't force it by law on others." Explain to me how those politicians are not seeking to keep their power and positions by killing babies – and a whole lot

more of them than Herod ever did. I don't say this to excuse Herod. There's no excuse for what he did. I'm only trying to put things into perspective. The same evil goes on among us today.

Finally third: Herod, the man who would be king, is a picture perfect image of the sinful nature in all of us. What does your sinful nature want? The same things Herod did: to be in control, to be served by others, to be loved and honored for your achievements, to be spoken well of and never criticized. And what does your sinful nature fear? It fears losing control and not being in charge. It fears being exposed for its pride, its selfish ambition, and its other evils. It fears being required to change, to submit to another authority; ultimately it fears having to die. But that is exactly what is required of it. It has to die.

In each of our own ways, we are all the man who would be king. And like Herod, we are not legitimate kings (or queens, if you ladies prefer). But there is genuine King. We just celebrated his birth. He came to this world to save us. And we're all for that. Thank you, Jesus. But he also came to this world to rule. And the Herod in each of us resists that. The Herod in you sees Jesus as a threat. There can only be one king. One of you has got to go. It won't be Jesus. The Lord will see to that.

So, let it be the Herod. Let the man who would be king in you die the death of repentance so that the new man who in Jesus has both a Savior and a King may come forth and live with him in holiness, blessedness, and righteousness forever. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!