



December 7, 2014  
Rev. Dr. Mark Toone  
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church

*What do you want for Christmas, Herod?*  
*My Power!*  
Matthew 2:1-18

Seventy-three years ago this morning, 353 Japanese aircraft attacked the American Naval forces at Pearl Harbor. 2,403 Americans were killed and almost 1200 were wounded. All eight US battleships were damaged or destroyed, along with many other vessels and aircraft. The next day, President Roosevelt declared war on Japan, less than 30 years after the "war to end all wars" had concluded. As it turns out, the twentieth century was the bloodiest in human history. 263 wars were waged and the death toll from battle has been estimated as high as 230 million human beings. To put it in perspective, that would be about 72% of the population of the United States.

Why are we such a brutal race? What drives us to attack and kill our fellow human beings? Here's one answer: power; the lust for power, for control, for domination over others. British Lord Acton once said famously, "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely." But there is more to his quote. "Great men are almost always bad men... [especially] when you add the tendency... of corruption by authority." Corruption by authority...

This Advent we are asking the question, "What do you want for Christmas?" Last week, Joseph's answer was, "I want my divorce. Mary has humiliated me and I want out of this engagement." By the way, if you missed that message and you feel like your marriage is teetering on the brink, I would beg you to get online and listen to that sermon. It might be life-changer for you. This morning we turn to a Christmas character who was one of the most powerful men in the Bible and who was determined to hold onto that power, whatever the cost. "What do you want for Christmas, Herod?" "I want my power."

<sup>1</sup>In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup>asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." <sup>3</sup>When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; <sup>4</sup>and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.

<sup>5</sup>They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

<sup>6</sup> 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'" <sup>7</sup>Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared.

<sup>8</sup>Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage."

<sup>9</sup>When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. <sup>10</sup>When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. <sup>11</sup>On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. <sup>12</sup>And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

<sup>13</sup>Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "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." <sup>14</sup>Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, <sup>15</sup>and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son."

<sup>16</sup>When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. <sup>17</sup>Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

<sup>18</sup> "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more."

At the height of its power, the Roman Empire controlled 2.6 million square miles and governed about ¼ of the world's population. In every new area they conquered, they would install a puppet king... basically, a traitor from that country whom they could count on to place Roman interests ahead of everything else. In 37 BC, Rome appointed a man to rule over Judea as King of the Jews; he would hold that position for 32 years. His name was Herod or, as he came to be known, Herod the Great.

Herod is remembered for two things. First, he was the greatest builder in the history of Israel. He built the capitol of Roman Palestine on the coast and named it

Caesarea. It included a Hippodrome, a theatre and a man-made harbor. He also built a famous fortress on the top of a rocky mesa near the Dead Sea: Masada. But his most famous construction project was the remodel of the Jerusalem Temple. First he built a huge retaining wall around the temple mount which increased the size of the building area many times. Then he remodeled the temple extravagantly, covering it with gold so that pilgrims saw it shining from miles away. It was said that if you had not seen Herod's temple, you had not seen a beautiful building.

The temple itself was destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD, but part of the Herodian wall remains as the most holy of Jewish sites. It is called The Western Wall or—as some call it erroneously—the Wailing Wall.

Herod was a great builder. He was also one of the most paranoid, ruthless men ever to sit on a throne. He held power for 32 years by crushing every whiff of dissent. He had his favorite wife, Mariamne, executed because he suspected her of treason. For good measure, he also he executed her two sons, her brother, her grandfather and her mother. He also had his own firstborn son strangled. And that was just his family. Anyone whom Herod even suspected of being a threat to his throne could be certain of a visit from his palace guard. Herod was so ruthless, Caesar Augustus once said of him, "It is better to be Herod's pig than [his] son."

That is the context for our story. So when wise men guided by a star arrived at Herod's palace in Jerusalem, asking directions to the birthplace of the newborn king of the Jews... can you understand how that would be like waving a red cape in front of a bull?

First, Herod tries to manipulate them. "Go find the baby," he says, "and afterwards, return to me with directions so that I, too, can worship him." Yeah, right. Worship him with the blade of a sword, maybe. Like so many times before, Herod sensed a threat to his power and made plans to eliminate it, but when he realized the magi had betrayed him, he went to plan B. He ordered the murder of every boy baby two years old and younger in Bethlehem... just to cover his bases.

The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem is the oldest church in the Holy Land, built over a cave believed to be the birthplace of Jesus. Right next door is another church. Walk down into the catacombs beneath and you will find a cave where the ancient skeletons of several babies were discovered. This is revered as the burial place of the infants that were murdered by Herod.

Frankly, Bethlehem was such a tiny place, it is unlikely that there would have been more than a handful of two-year-old boys in the whole region. But that doesn't make Herod's actions any less monstrous. Can you imagine the horror for those four or five or six families when Herod's soldiers rode in, broke into their homes, tore the children from their mother's arms and murdered them before their eyes? This event is remembered as the "Slaughter of the Innocents." Of

course, Herod failed in his attempt to kill Jesus. Joseph was visited by an angel in a dream and warned to flee with his family to Egypt.

This is the dark side of the Christmas story. You don't have a lot of Christmas carols written about the "slaughter of the innocents," do you? You don't see this scene acted out in children's pageants. But in some ways, this awful chapter in the Christmas story, with all its raw brutality, sums up the reason for Christmas.

Why did Herod do this horrible thing? What was he so desperate to protect that he was willing to carry out such a barbaric act? His power! For most of his adult life, paranoid Herod was fanatical about one thing: protecting his power. If it meant executing his favorite wife... ah well, too bad, but so be it. If it meant killing his own sons... *c'est la vie!* And if he was willing to take out his own relatives, what qualms do you think he'd have murdering a few nameless babies of worthless Jewish peasants in Bethlehem?

This is a horrible story, isn't it? What decent human being wouldn't be horrified? That someone would go to such lengths to cling to power is breathtakingly evil. But here's the disturbing truth: there is a little bit of Herod in every one of us, for every one of us wants to fight to hold on to the throne of our own lives. Isn't that true? Herod dealt ruthlessly with Jesus because he did not want to surrender his throne. How are we different? We want to retain the power over our own lives. We want to call the shots. We want to decide what is right and wrong. We want to live our own way.

For several months, we studied what it means to be a revolutionary disciple of Jesus. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus outlines how to live his way... as his apprentice. It is counter-cultural and radical. It means forgiving and loving your enemies; it means praying and fasting and giving generously; it means rejecting lust and fighting for your marriage and hating divorce; it means keeping your word even when inconvenient. It means living a life so filled with the light of Christ that our Heavenly Father is glorified. That's what it means to be a true disciple of Jesus.

That's what it means to call Jesus "Lord." "Lord" is another word for "King." Calling Jesus "Lord" means we do this: get up out of the throne of our own lives and surrender that throne—that power—to Jesus. And then, we bow before him as the only worthy ruler of our life.

But for the rest of our lives, we continue to fight the temptation to change our minds. "Jesus, I really don't trust you to handle this situation; I'm not sure you understand all that's going on here. So, just for this moment, would you mind if I climbed back up there... just for this situation." Problem is... it is never "just for this situation." If this becomes our habit, again and again, we want to depose Jesus from his rightful place of authority. We don't trust him to rule our lives. We want to reclaim our power. Or at least, share it! Jesus is a generous guy, but he

does not share a throne. It is you—or it is he—who will occupy the throne of your life.

As awful as Herod was, the truth is his lust for power is only a more horrific version of the same battle we all fight. We may gasp at this story, but every time we disobey Jesus, every time we choose to harbor a grudge rather than forgive, every time we choose to gossip, every time we take a second glance at a beautiful woman, every time we betray our spouse in the flesh or on a computer, every time we spend God's tithe on ourselves, every time we lash out in anger and speak ill of someone, every time we worry instead of trusting... every time, that is Herod popping out of us! That is our attempt to hold onto power, to cling to the throne of our own lives and to finish the work that Herod started that night in Bethlehem.

Herod missed his opportunity, but 33 years later, the soldiers finally caught up with Jesus. He was murdered and for the same reason that Herod tried and failed: because humanity—you and I—rightly consider Jesus to be a threat to our power. Every day as a true disciple of Jesus means surrendering the thrones of our lives one more time and saying, "Jesus, as much as I want to sit in this thing, I know that it would only bring disaster and death. Only you are worthy to occupy this place. Only you can resist the corrosive effects of power. So, once more—today, in this moment—I surrender. And I declare you the Lord, the king of my life."

When we come to the Lord's Table that is exactly what we re-declare. Jesus—the great threat to human power, yet the only one trustworthy enough to sit upon that throne—proved he could handle the power we cannot by giving it up... by sacrificing his own life in place of ours. The cross of Calvary is the only true slaughter of the innocent, and this day in this meal we, who were saved from the spirit of Herod, bow before Jesus in deep gratitude for saving our lives.

## **Sermon Questions**

- **REFLECT & APPLY TOGETHER:** Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.
- **PRAY TOGETHER:** Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for, and lay one concern before the Lord.
- **DIG DEEPER**
  1. What is the most awful encounter that you have had with power run amok?

2. Jesus was the greatest leader ever and yet he advocated for something call servant-leadership. Does a servant-leader have power? Explain.
3. Can you think of a time when power and control was an issue for you, personally? In what way does this text challenge you to change the way you handle your own power?