

IN SERVICE TO THE KING

Finding the Route to Peace

Text: Matthew 2:1-12; 15-16

The Character of a King?

One summer, many years ago, I met a friend for lunch in mid-town Manhattan. While walking along Fifth Avenue near 34th Street, we were stopped by a trio of French tourists asking directions. "Where is zee Empire State Building?" one of them asked. It was all I could do to keep from laughing at the ignorance of the question. I just pointed skyward. "Look up," I said. "You're standing right in front of it."

Herod the Great must have felt the same way that day when a troupe of travelers posed to him an apparently similar ignorant question. **"Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews?"** (Mat 2:2) the visitors asked. It must have been all that he could do to keep from blurting out: "Look up, you idiots; you're standing right in front of him."

"King of the Jews" was, after all, the title that Caesar Augustus himself had given Herod at his coronation and everything about Herod loved the position. Never mind the fact that Herod wasn't actually a Jew himself. Ironically, his father, Antipater, had been an Idumean – that is a descendent of the Jew-hating residents of the land of Edom to the southeast of the Dead Sea. But Dad had done some well-chosen favors for the Roman administration and, in return, Caesar had given his family the perk of power over Judea.

At first, this must have seemed to Herod like being made monarch of Guam -- not exactly the most thrilling throne in the world. But being KING anywhere beat just about every other job and Herod would make the most of it. Serving that ambition were TWO PARTICULAR ATTRIBUTES of character that would enable Herod to parlay a minor kingship into one of the most infamous governments of all time.

For ONE thing, Herod had an amazing ability to fake devotion. Though there is nothing in the public record to suggest that he gave a whit about the fortunes of Caesar, a shrewd political savvy ran in the family and Herod refined it to an art. Under his leadership, tax revenues to the Empire shot up like the market cap of Apple. While gaining a reputation as one of the Roman Market's most loyal performers, the King quietly managed to skim huge bonuses for himself. As a reward for his productivity, the Roman Senate gave Herod an army which he used to expand his district east into Jordan and north into Syria and Lebanon.

The big stick of a Roman fighting force quickly came to serve to Herod's SECOND dominant character trait -- a ruthless commitment to killing threats to his throne. Upon rising to power, Herod married a Hasmonean princess, one of the descendants of the Maccabean Jews who, years earlier, had successfully thrown off Greek rule and set up an independent Hebrew state. Faking devotion to his wife's family, Herod lulled the Hasmoneans into a false self-confidence -- then proceeded to slaughter every one of them. He thereby preempted the possibility that they might one day try to oust him as their ancestors had cast off the authority of Athens.

When Herod became concerned by the influence of the high priest Aristobulus, the brother of one of his ten wives, he axed him and then murdered the related wife. Suspecting that one of his two eldest sons might have designs on his throne, Herod beheaded them both. In one of his last acts of infamy, Herod ordered from his deathbed the imprisonment of the leading citizens of Jerusalem. Concerned that the Jews wouldn't weep adequately at his own death, Herod commanded that, at the moment he expired, the cream of Jerusalem's society be butchered, so at least there would be some weeping in the streets. I don't know, but I don't think I'd like to be the candidate standing next to him at the Presidential Debates!

Do you see how Herod's two major attributes of character come together in the story of Christmas? The travelers from the East earnestly ask: **"Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews?"** and immediately the gears begin to turn. FIRST, he fakes devotion to the subject of their desire: **"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."** (Mat 2:8). THEN, when the magi fail to report back, Herod shows his commitment to killing all threats to his throne. The passage immediately after today's lesson recounts: **"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."** (Matt 2:16) After all, there were no lengths to which Herod was not willing to go, in service to the King.

The Herod Inside

As you can see by now, Herod the Great stands in the long line of megalomaniacal, genocidal tyrants we've seen too often in history -- people for whom pride, greed and anger burned out of control. It is easy to hate Herod and we should. It is tempting to write him off as someone that doesn't belong in the sweet story of Christmas, but there we shouldn't. For the truth is that while Herod stands as an archetype of evil, his is a depravity that insinuates itself in subtler forms all too easily in OUR character also. He is a reminder of why we too need a Savior.

After all -- True Story -- devotion to Christ is something we can fake too. Isn't that right? How many times have we mouthed the statement about His being our Lord, but then felt surprisingly little obligation to actually go and do what he says in our treatment of enemies, our handling of money, our care for the poor? How often have we shown up at a service of worship (gotta be some Brownie points for that), but then actually poured little of our selves into the prayer of confession or the songs of praise. Sometimes we just fake our devotion. We'll call out God's name when we are in trouble, but not live for the honor of that Name when the clouds have passed. We'll wear a Cross around our neck but be unwilling to bear a cross very far. We'll talk about how badly Christian moral values are needed in our culture, but actually sacrifice very little to keep the witness of the Church going. Someone else will take care of that.

If I'm honest with myself, I know I'm quite concerned about appearing devoted to Jesus; but I'm not always so sure I actually want to BE devoted. The problem, you see is that I like being King. Kings and Queens don't like to have their way of life or their opinions seriously challenged. I'm not particularly happy, for example, about the things this sermon is saying to me already. People who sit on thrones don't enjoy someone trying to rearrange their priorities or plans. They like to be in CONTROL of those things themselves.

That's why many of us who like the crown have devised ways of killing off threats to our throne. We don't do this the way Herod or al-Baghdadi of ISIS might, of course. We've found more genteel, socially-sanctioned ways of retaining our power. Sometimes we assassinate the reputations of our critics -- if not publicly then privately, so we silence the sound of their voice.

Sometimes God tries to speak to us through a family member, a friend, somebody at work, telling us something hard for us to hear. But we say "Ah, that's just their issues." Or "I could find plenty wrong with them too." Sometimes the preacher speaks a word we don't like and we rationalize that it's probably meant for that person next to me, or I never liked that pastor anyway, or that's not really the Word of GOD. But oftentimes the truth is this: We enjoy being King and we're not particularly interested in hearing from the One who really is when He says: "Surrender your program, your possessions, your practices and priorities to Mine."

Where Is the King?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great German pastor and theologian, died at the hands of a Herod who couldn't bear the wise man's message that Christ alone is the Fuhrer, the supreme Leader. Earlier Bonhoeffer wrote: "Our hearts have room only for one all-embracing devotion, and we can only cleave to one Lord." That's why the most important question of our lives is the one the Magi posed that day in Jerusalem: "**Where is the King?**"

If we look in the mirror and answer: "Why, you're standing in front of him, in front of her," we lose everything. We may gain the whole world; we may expand our little empires for a season; but we've lost everything. We've settled for a life predicated on our little power instead of God's great power. We're stuck on a toilet disguised as a throne, progressively circling further down the bowl, asking "How can I get my way?"

God's vision for our lives is that we get up and go off in service to the true King. To go on that mission means responding again and again to the glorious questions: "What tough truth do you want me to hear today so that your renovation of my life can continue on? What good desire of your Kingdom, Lord, can you use me today to bring about?"

In the end, there are two courses open to each of us. We can sit in the seat of Herod -- faking our devotion, while secretly working to destroy whatever or whoever threatens our place on the throne. A lot of people never get off that seat. OR, alternatively, we can go the way of the wise men in the Christmas story (Mat 2:12). We can FURTHER our devotion and crucify in ourselves whatever opposes GOD's place on the throne. If you are willing to go home by that second route, then let me suggest in closing two practices that can help you pursue that goal.

First, like the Magi before you, devote yourself to the long journey of discipleship. As wise as you already are, don't stay where you are. Resolve today that in this year ahead, you are going to take practical steps to go further -- in your knowledge of God, in the growth of a truly Christ-like character, in your willingness to follow wherever the star of his Holy Spirit leads you. Go the full distance toward Christian maturity. You won't be sorry you did.

And FINALLY, offer the real King a sacrifice worthy of who He is. Don't just do the token thing this year; follow the example of the wise men. Give Christ the **gold** you'd normally hoard, so that it can advance His kingdom instead of yours. Offer up a grudge you've been holding, a sinful habit you've been hiding, a demand you've been making, a painful memory you've been nursing. Burn like **frankincense** before Him and be done with it today. Then pour out some **myrrh**, an oil of blessing, to some child of God in need of it. Pour out the words of forgiveness, of encouragement, of love or kindness, of faith and hope that someone needs to hear.

These are the ways wise men and women bow down and worship Him. This is how you open the clenched fist of personal control and extend the open hand of surrender to the one who is truly King. And here's a little secret. You don't really LOSE anything when you give God his rightful place on the throne of your life. On the contrary, you GAIN everything. You gain the wonderful peace of knowing that He is in command. You gain the marvelous peace of feeling His power at work through you.

Henri Nouwen, put it this way: "Christmas is saying YES to something beyond all emotions and feelings. Christmas is saying YES to a hope based on God's initiative, which has nothing to do with what I think or feel. Christmas is believing that the salvation of the world is God's work and not mine... [For] into this broken world... a child is born who is called Son of the Most High, Prince of Peace, Savior (and Lord)." And – True Story -- we are better off in the service to THAT King.

Please pray with me...

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Thanks to Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, p. 45 for the seminal thought here.
Henri Nouwen, *The Road to Daybreak*, pp. 104-105.