



Poland Presbyterian Church

At the Green since 1802

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First Sunday in Christmastide

Sermon by Brent J. Eelman

Herod the Pathetic

Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ² 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."³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶ '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.' "

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸ 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."⁹ 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. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹ 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. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

I have this theory that most of our theology about the birth of Christ comes from our Sunday School participation in the annual Christmas pageants. It was in the Christmas pageant that I got my first spoken moment in worship. I still remember the moving words that I intoned as a shepherd: "Let us go to Bethlehem and see." It was not the choice part, but I was determined to give it a new and bold interpretation: The best parts were Mary and the Angel. And then there was the villainous part: Herod. No child could play Herod and do him justice. Herod was the original "Grinch" in the Christmas story and there is nothing likeable about him. The way I saw it, was if Herod got his way, there would never be a Christmas, and I would not get that Lionel train set that I coveted so badly.

Sunday School pageants really give Herod a bad rap. Secular history has been much kinder. Herod is known to history as "Herod the Great." He became governor of Galilee at the age of twenty-five. He became King ten years later and reigned for almost forty years. In the volatile world of Middle-Eastern politics he was a true survivor who managed to stay one step ahead of treachery, assassination and defeat. What I would like to do in the next few moments is: 1. Review the reign

of Herod the Great. 2. Examine his role in the birth of Jesus. And 3. Listen to what this says to us today.

I

There is not enough time to tell the story of Herod the Great. His fifty years of involvement in the politics of the Middle East indicate that he was a very astute politician. He was not Jewish by birth, yet he served as King over Jerusalem and its regions for 40 years. He was not a native born Roman, and yet he was able to win the favor of Octavius, (Caesar Augustus) and was able to survive the politics that dominated the Middle East during the rule of Cleopatra and Anthony.

He was a complex individual and has been described as having many contradictions. Some would describe him as a helpful person; others would only know his cruelty. But there were two things that dominated his 40 years of rule. First he was a great builder and second he was insecure to the point of being paranoid. He received the designation "Great" because of his building program. He used it to win over the hearts of his constituents. In Jerusalem he built a new market, an amphitheater, a theater, a building where the Sanhedrin (the Jewish Court) could convene, and a luxurious palace. He built fortresses in Herodion, and Masada. He ordered new buildings in Jericho and Samaria. He even began rebuilding the Jewish Temple in 20 BCE. His crowning achievement was the construction of a new port which he called Caesarea in honor of the emperor.

The other characteristic of his reign was his insecurity and its resultant bloodshed. From the very beginning, Herod showed a willingness to accomplish his ends via force and bloodshed. Enemies were executed. Then friends were executed when he began to worry about them.. and then he even executed his own sons. Augustus, upon hearing this, joked that it was preferable to be Herod's pig than his son... (very insulting remark to a Jew!)

II

In the gospel of Matthew Herod's insecurity is front and center. Matthew described Herod as "frightened". What was he afraid of? A child! A Baby! How did he respond? He had all the children of Bethlehem and its regions, who were two years or under killed.

- The Bible does not use the word "Great" when describing Herod.
- The Bible does not go into a lengthy tome about his building and his accomplishments.
- The Bible does not mention his political savvy nor his ability to keep the peace in a region that knew little peace.

The Bible only shows him to be the archetype of a scoundrel and a murderer. He was the one who planned to stop the whole Christmas thing... and like a crafty politician, he said one thing, ("Find him so that I may worship him.") while planning another.

The Bible paints Herod as a frightened pathetic man. He had a lot of power, but he used his power to hurt and destroy. He was a man who acted upon his worse fears rather than his greatest hopes. The Bible does not see him as "great."

III

What does this say to us? I believe it offers us three lessons for today:

First, it should lead us to ponder the nature of greatness. Herod accomplished much, and had a lot of power and influence.

- But the story of greatness in the Bible is the story of a young teenage woman, Mary, who bears a child and risks marginalization.
- The story of greatness in the bible is the story of a carpenter, Joseph, who swallows pride and listens to what God has to say rather than his own machismo.
- The story of greatness is not in the luxurious halls of Jerusalem, nor the dazzling port of Caesarea, but rather in a guest house in the hamlet of Bethlehem.

Second: It should lead us to ask what is important in life? We spend an awful lot of time chasing the powers of this world like Herod and when we have it... we live in fear that we will lose it... because other people want it. "Herod the Great" was a failure at home, in his relationships with others... and when we consider his life, we are led to ask: "what is really important?"

Finally, it should temper some of the judgments that we make about greatness. Herod accomplished many things.. he built and he ruled for a long time... but he was not great. Compared with him is the story of a child, who grew to be a man.. who spent about thirty months, wandering around the Middle East, teaching, preaching and healing. He was put to death while still quite young... We know him as Jesus, the Messiah.

The Bible poses this question in the story of Herod: who was great? Herod is but a footnote in the history of salvation. At the center is a peasant child, born in a small town, in the middle of Herod's kingdom.

The first are last.

The last are first.

This is the good news. Amen.