

Sermon 6 December 2015
‘Our Coming Saviour: Herod- King of the Jews’
Isaiah 9:6-7 Micah 5:2-5 Mt 2:1-23

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts be acceptable to you our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.

Herod – King of the Jews is our Christmas character today. A couple of Sunday’s ago we reflected on the clash of Kingdoms discussion between Pilate and Jesus in the trial scene before Jesus crucifixion. The echo / the clash is again being heard at Jesus birth.

Isaiah’s prophecy speaks into the kingdom that Jesus has been sent to open up for all people. And one of the important things for this ‘Kingdom-clash’ in this prophecy is that the King will be **born** of David’s line – will be by **blood inheritance** a king – **THE king of the Jews**. The second important thing is that Isaiah defines what kind of Kingdom it will be- what the rules / expectations / attitude / culture... will be. The last significant fact for today from Isaiah is in the last sentence – ‘The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.’ – It is – was – will be The Lord who will do it – not a human not by human effort, not through human activity....

1. The King of the Jews Kingdom is one of “justice and righteousness”; 2.The King is born into the role, will inherit the position; 3.It is the Lord who makes sure it happens. The Lord God has been planning for Christmas for a very long time. Today we catch glimpses of God’s hand guiding through dreams of instruction that led to Jesus’s protection, gifts from the magi that we believe confirm Jesus status; and the prophetic fulfillment seen in the Matthew 2 text.

So looking deeper now into Herod – King of the Jews through our Scriptures (Matthew’s story) and from what we know about Herod from history. I think Herod should be remembered as the King who tried to stop Christmas ^{1*} Rather like the Dr Seuss character ‘The Grinch’ – Herod tried to stop Christmas from happening. Just like the Grinch – he failed! Unlike the Grinch’s story, Herod’s did not end nicely! Dr Seuss made up the character of “the Grinch”, but Herod was a real historical person and he played a significant adversarial role in our Christmas story.

^{1*}Historians have filled page upon page of Herod’s biography and accomplishments over the barbaric, political, and manipulative life that he lived. He was born in 73 BC. His mother was an ethnic Arab and his father an Edomite (He was at best a ‘half-Jew’) His family had a habit of siding with the strong powers of the day. His grandfather and father, both named Antipater, had served as military commanders in their homeland of Idumea, which was once a tribal state located to the south of Judea. Roman historians show that Herod’s father and Herod were assets to the Roman military machine. Both were rewarded for their faithfulness to Rome with positions of power in areas under Roman rule.

When Herod’s father was killed by poisoning in 43 BC, Herod began to emerge as his father’s political heir and successor under the Roman umbrella of power. While serving as appointed governor in the region of Galilee, Herod made a name for himself by putting down a rebellion in that area and thwarting further dissention around Jerusalem. As he had proven himself as an asset to Rome, in 40 BC, the **Roman senate** named Herod the king of the Jews. *But* because of some other ongoing civil war power struggles within Rome, it wasn’t until 37 BC (3 years later) that Herod officially began his rule as king of the Jews.

His first “Kingly” act in 37 BC was to murder the entire 45 members of the Sanhedrin ^{*2}, the ruling body for the Jews, filling the now ‘empty’ seats with his voters! Herod’s “rule” would span from 37 BC to 4 BC. For thirty-three years He ruled harshly and with great impact as king of Judea—though he never was or could be the rightful heir to the throne. Remember our beginning Isaiah text? Only someone descended from King David and so was fully Jewish could inherit the ‘throne’. Granted power or being given a ‘job’

^{1*} Script from Skitguys is foundation ^{*2} JPetty <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/13444a.htm> ("Antiq.", XV, i, 2)

with a title did not make you King of the Jews; only by birth would the King be recognized and accepted by the ‘real Jews’.

While Herod was in power, he built his reputation for being ruthless in his attempt to stay in complete control as the appointed king of the Jews. He was brutal and shed much blood to secure his throne from **any** who might appear as a threat. Herod murdered his own family members if he thought a coup was underway to try to usurp his authority and throne. Herod killed his favorite wife, his own sons, and many others in order to keep a firm grip on **his** kingdom.

When Herod was not killing off potential threats to his throne, he was building his kingdom and expanding his influence throughout the region. He was wealthy beyond belief and constantly taxed those under his rule. However, when famine came across his lands, Herod was quick to figure out ways to feed his people and offer life to those who looked to Him for leadership and protection. It was Herod who rebuilt the great temple in Jerusalem as well as cities with structures that still stand to this day. From his building projects at Caesarea on the Mediterranean Coast (they didn’t have a deep water harbor – so he built the sea wall... and harbor), his summer palace at Masada along the Dead Sea cliffs near En Gedi, Herod’s architectural footprint stretched far and wide during his reign as king.

Herod had worked too hard politically and militarily to give up his position to **any** new king — especially to one who would be **born** king of the Jews instead of *granted* the kingship. This is only some of the backstory from the history books leads us to our story from Matthew c2:

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:

“And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel” (Matthew 2:1-6).

We understand this to be that the long-awaited prophecy of a God’s Messiah, God’s King being born in Bethlehem had finally come true. The one born king of the Jews was living right under Herod’s nose—and he didn’t even know it. When Herod gathered the chief priests and scribes together to help him understand what the prophecies said about the birth of the coming Christ, the members of the Jewish Pharisees and Sadducees who were under Herod’s thumb told him of the prophecy from Micah 5:2: But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.

Not only did the prophets of old proclaim a coming arrival of the Messiah, but also the heavens declared Jesus’ arrival—his advent—with a star in the sky. The wise men—or “magi from the east”—had followed it from their homelands somewhere around Babylon. When these wise men saw the star rising in the sky, they took it as sign that something significant had happened on earth. These Gentile men of power, means, and intellect had come from afar to worship and pay homage to this newborn king.

Of all the people in Matthew 2, these ‘Gentiles’ from the east were the only ones who would worship the newborn king. The Jewish religious leaders tagged in verse 4 as “chief priests and scribes of the people” basically responded to Herod’s questions of prophecies of the coming Messiah with indifference. However, according to verse 3, Herod responded to the news of the Christ child with a heart that was “troubled.” Three groups of people and three different responses to Jesus’ birth are present in the first six

verses of Matthew 2. Herod was troubled. The Jewish chief priests and scribes were indifferent. But the Gentile wise men were ready to worship.

Has anything changed through the ages? Do we not see the same three responses of people today when it comes to celebrating the birth of Jesus? Some are troubled, others are indifferent, and there are people ready to worship. The wise men were fulfilling the promise made in Jeremiah 29:13: You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart.

Sometimes we get mad at God and we think: 'Where was God when I was going through that horrible time? Why didn't God come and make it better?' Jeremiah says, "When you seek me . . ." Maybe we're supposed to have a more active role in the process???

These wise men from the east were seeking the newborn king of the Jews —that's why they were on the journey that led them to Jerusalem and Herod. Herod hadn't gotten to his place and position of prominence over the decades by being dumb. He was strategically smooth and politically motivated when he needed to gather information that could lead to quashing a threat to his throne. He summoned and questioned the wise men to see what he could find out from them while they were guests in his palace:

Video.....

Matthew wrote:

Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him." After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way (Matthew 2:7-12).

Herod had 'diligently inquired' from the magi all the information he could, and sent them on their way. His plan was of course for the magi to lead him to the home of this young threat likely not more than a few months old. The magi were off with great excitement, and Verse 11 states they went into the house where they saw Jesus and Mary. They were overwhelmed, fell on their faces and worshiped Jesus with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. In Matthew's story they are Magi, wise-men, Matthew only has two kings: Herod and Jesus. One was granted the title, while the other was born a king.

Remember how this is the story of what God was doing and not Herod? A clue to this difference is because of the way the Magi were guided 'home'. By a 'dream' they were told not to return to Herod – but to go home by a different route. Now that we know Herod a little better, it's not hard for us to imagine Herod 'waiting' and when it became clear that He would not have an RSVP from the wise men, that he would lose the plot! It says in verse 16 that Herod "became furious," the words used are *thumoo lian*. The grammar indicates that Herod had lost all control of his passion in such a way that now his obsession to remain in control of his kingdom completely controlled him. All his senses were blinded by rage, anger, and the desire to keep control of his own kingdom, his destiny.

But in the clash of the Kingdoms, the Lord wasn't about to lose, God had made plans that Herod couldn't stop.

Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, 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." And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt I called my son" (Mt 2:13-15).

For Matthew not only had God provided and prepared a place of protection for Jesus, but he also was fulfilling the promise of prophecy spoken of seven hundred years before through his prophet Hosea: When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son (Hosea 11:1).

This prophecy was one that tied back to God's faithfulness to his people from the Exodus in Egypt. Bethlehem was seventy-five miles to the border of Egypt. There were upward of one million Jewish people living in Egypt at this time.

When Herod realized that the wise-men had avoided him, according to Matthew he ordered all the male children in Bethlehem and surrounding region who were two years old or under to be killed. This is the 'time – scale' that he got from the wise men. In English translation we miss a God-moment, according to the exact 'time' the wise-men had given Herod – he killed. Matthew calls it *chronos* 'time', human measurement chronological time – and for Herod it is a 'killing' time. It is not *Karios* time – God's time which is a time of justice and peace and righteousness.... Herod's kingdom time kills; God's Kingdom time enables life.

Herod **had** to kill all 'pretender's' to retain control of **his** kingdom, but not even Herod could stop Christmas and the Lord God's plans for the establishment of His Kingdom! Herod's days were numbered and he died after Jesus was safe in Egypt.

But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, "Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's life are dead." And he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee. And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene (Matthew 2:19-23).

Herod, the appointed king of the Jews, was dead and left a horrible legacy. Jesus, the one born King of the Jews, would have a very different gift of inheritance to give.

King Herod lost all he worked so hard to grasp, all he murdered and killed for, thought he controlled his destiny, his kingdom. King Jesus was, is, and always will be in control of all of the Lord's living creation. No –one can stop Christmas from coming. Nor can we stop Christ from coming back again at his second advent, the coming we wait for, as we remember his birth.

Therefore, may we approach the Christ of Christmas—the newborn King of the Jews—as the wise men chose to do on that first encounter with Jesus. May we worship him and bow down before him and offer the child born and given to us, gifts worthy of the King of Kings.