

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
December 15 & 16, 2012
John Crosby
The Voices of Christmas: HEROD
Matthew 2:2-19**

In about an hour these risers will be filled with 70 or 80 or 90 kids singing, and after they've finished singing, Jody will come up and do the children's sermon and tell the story of the birth of Jesus or a part of that story. If you've been around churches for a while, you'll realize that what she is telling them is the G- or PG-rated version from the Gospel of Matthew. That's deliberate because the story of Herod is not a PG-version story.

About the year 40 BC, a man went to Rome to receive the title *King of the Jews*. He was really not the rightful heir to the throne so many of the Jews hated him right at the start as an imposter. They expected a Messiah who would come and get rid of the Romans, a political deliverer. Instead, Herod spends the next 20 years as a builder. He is a great builder. He builds cities along the coast and roads to connect the cities. He is the one who rebuilds the Temple of Solomon. It's huge. It's bigger than Solomon's Temple. When you look at the Jews praying at the Wailing Wall, that is really Herod's Temple built on top of Solomon's old one. So because of all this building, Herod becomes known throughout the Roman Empire as Herod the Great.

But Herod was not great. He was not a nice guy. Historians aren't exactly sure, but he was married 10 or 11 times and had a least 43 different children. He apparently only had one wife he really loved, Mariamne. She was only 15 when he took her as his wife. She had five children in eight years and then Herod felt in his heart that she turned on him, so he had his favorite wife executed. He wasn't too sure about her mother either, so he killed his mother-in-law also. He had two of his own sons killed because he thought they wanted to take over from him before he was ready to go. And when he was close to dying, on his deathbed, another one of his sons got a little too close, and he had that one executed five days before he died. Herod gave orders that at his death 50 people from different families should be killed so that someone would be crying on the day that they heard that he is dead. That was Herod the Great. A real prince! A real king! That is the story that leads to Matthew. Would you join me in the tradition of standing for the Gospel. Matthew 2:1-12.

2 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ² and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." ³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written...."

⁷ Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him." ⁹ After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹ On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

¹⁶ 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.

The Word of the Lord.

All: Thanks be to God.

Please be seated. That is the voice of Herod. The power of the Gospel is that it is not afraid to look unflinchingly at evil and say, "This is bad, and bad things happen when bad is let loose." Heather [Heather Hood, Minister of Worship & Music] sent me a cartoon from the StarTribune about the way we look at Christmas. On the one hand you see the Wise Men heading to Bethlehem and on the other where all the lights and TVs and helicopters are, Kate Middleton is having her own baby, another future King of England. It was hard to listen for the voice of the real King back then, and it's hard to listen now because Herod's voice is so strong. We all hear Herod's voice. It's a voice of power and fear and duplicity. It will say anything to get reelected. Herod's voice is like a bad politician, using religion instead of listening for God, lashing out when it doesn't get its way. Do we know anything like that? Herod is the smartest person in the room because he realizes there can be only one on the throne.

One of my friends said Herod is Scrooge without Christmas Future. Herod is the Grinch with a heart that stays three sizes too small, the dark side of Christmas. Herod is the reason for Christmas. Jesus doesn't come into a world of Hallmark cards and twinkly lights and presents under the tree. Jesus comes into a world of darkness and real pain, of serious dysfunction, of brokenness and political oppression. Jesus comes into a world where Herod still lives, a world where innocent children are still slaughtered by evil. One of the passages that struck me this time was that it says when Herod heard there was a new King in town, he was disturbed and all Jerusalem with him.

It was an unsettled kingdom even though they were doing better than any time in the last hundred years. You and I are unsettled. We live in an unsettled kingdom, the richest, most powerful nation in the history of the planet. We keep waiting for the other shoe to drop, for things to get bad. That's Herod's fear especially because Herod isn't just back in the Bible. Herod is *here*. Herod is in Connecticut. Herod is right around us, and there is a part of Herod's heart that lives in your pastor's heart and lives in yours. Alexander Solzhenitsyn spent a decade in the prisons of Russia, the Gulags. He found God in the Gulag, and he found evil. He writes, "The line between good and evil runs through the entire universe, through the middle of the human heart."

When I was writing this sermon on Thursday, I started it out with “Who escapes King Herod? The peasants and the pagans.” But then Friday came. Maybe nobody escapes King Herod. But who does the work of the other King in earshot of Herod’s palace? Who stands up to Herod even if they die? Who finds ways to bring light into the darkness? Well, that is the surprising thing. It is not the religious people. The only ones who hear the voice of the real King are the evil ones who try to stamp it out and then the peasants whom nobody listens to and the pagans, far from God. That’s who the Magi are. They are pagans. Real change comes from the outside, from the edges toward the middle. How did they hear the voice that nobody else heard? As I listened to the story of the Magi with those ears, I saw that the reason they heard is because they followed the star, not the headlines. They followed the things that did not change instead of the polls that change all the time. They were guided by the eternal and not the transitory.

Yesterday morning [at the Men’s Breakfast], Dave Stark ended up talking to the men about Herod, too. He pointed out that the religious people in Jerusalem knew where the Messiah was going to be born, but then when they heard He’d been born, none of them went there. None of the religious go. Well, I mean, it is really far away. Do you know how far away Jerusalem is from Bethlehem? About five miles. You can do it in an hour’s walk, in two hour’s walk, but none of them went because that would have upset all of their lives. They had a good thing going, so they didn’t go that last five miles. Just the pagans and the peasants went, the ones religion didn’t have the answers for. That ought to say something to us. What do we say to the people who religion doesn’t have an answer for? Follow the things that don’t change and find the real King.

The Magi see the fake King and they go, “Uhhhh, not what I expected. Where’s the real King?” It says, when they find the real King, they were filled with joy and bowed before Him and worshipped Him with their treasures. Among the goats and the sheep and the smells of the barn, they saw the real King, just like you and I are supposed to see the real King among the least and the lost and the left behind. Not at Sak’s, not on Fifth Avenue, not under the trees that we are so proud of. They worshipped Him, it says, with their treasures, the best of the ancient world. People who kneel before the real King get what they really value. People who worship before the real King don’t have to beg for pledges to be turned in. They celebrate. They celebrate people who put their treasure at the feet of the King.

So they follow the star and not the polls. They didn’t go where everybody else went, and when they saw the real thing, they stopped. They bowed and worshipped with their lives. They served. And then it says, “Being warned in a dream, they went home by a different way.” Not just that they didn’t go back to the King, the same old King, they went home by a different way as changed people. They lived in counterculture ways. You and I live very much just like the culture we’re in. The Magi went home by a different way. They were supposed to be pagans. They couldn’t be good pagans any more. But they couldn’t be the same kind of king-followers. I think that’s where Presbyterians have trouble sometimes. We live in both kingdoms very easily. We live within the sound of Herod’s voice, and Monday through Saturday we know the rules of that game very well.

At our Men’s Breakfast yesterday, Tim Clark spoke up. He is very successful in his career but he said, “I realized that comfort did not bring me peace. I found that I could have comfort or I could have peace, but I had to unclench my hands from all the things that made my life comfortable and fast and crowded and goal-oriented and comfortable and successful. When my hands were open, then God could put peace into my heart. He could send me home by a

different way so that even when I heard that the children were slaughtered, I could believe that God had sent me to a different home.”

You can only go home by another way after you hear voices stronger than King Herod's. I guess this morning, I wonder what other way do you long for? Do you want to have a Christmas just like last year only 4 percent better? Or do you want to hear a different voice, a voice that the world cannot kill, a voice that will take you to different places, a voice that will call you to kneel and worship the real King. What stars will lead you to take that first step? I believe that only happens when I become convinced that over and over and over, I get trapped in the wrong way. I have to go home by a different way. I get trapped. You get trapped. We need to start by confessing that, so we would like to share together in a prayer of confession before I pray. When we hear the voice of Herod, we realize how much it loses. That's when we have to pray.

Prayer of Confession

God of Light, You have given us Jesus Christ, the Light of the World

All: Forgive us, Lord, for choosing to hide in the darkness of sin.

The Magi sought the Baby King to worship Him, but Herod sought Jesus to appease his jealous anger and pride.

All: Forgive us, Lord, when we let our desire for power, our impure pride, or the fear of losing control stand in the way of worshipping You with our lives.

Herod's hardness of heart brought death to innocent children and destruction to God's people.

All: Forgive us, Lord, when our hardened hearts cause us to inflict pain or judgment on others, or lead us away from the guiding presence of Your Spirit.

The Holy Child of Bethlehem has come to earth and has given His life for us so that we may be cleansed from sin and be made right with God.

Unison: Help us, Lord, to worship You with meekness of heart that You may enter into our lives and be born in us this day.

Lord God, I pray for my sisters and brothers here that this will be more than words we read when we are ruled by our fear that we have to be like the others, by our pride that wants to show who we are, by our anger that causes us to lash out and not forgive. When I hear the voice of Herod, I pray that You would speak to each of us and that the voice that comes from beyond the stars will guide us, the voice that promises life and love and hope and another way home, home with You. Bring us home this Christmas. In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, we pray. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.