

They Didn't See It Coming; Herod Matthew 2: 1-12 + 16-18

- I. Let's have a little quiz? I will tell you the movie and you tell me the villain of said movie. Ready? Batman? Joker. Star Wars? Darth Vader. Jaws well... Jaws. In Christmas movies, it works the same. The classic claymation version of Rudolf? The abominable snow man. **(image)** In the Christmas Story? The Bully **(image)** oh, what's his name. The Grinch? Well, the Grinch **(image)** The real Christmas story is no exception. What we find is a paranoid, bloodthirsty king who won't stop at anything to protect his rule. Any guesses on who this villain may be? Yes, King Herod, ironically named by the Roman Emperor himself, the Great. He wasn't so great for many of his subjects, but more on that in a moment as we explore Herod's life and what his story might say to us during this season.

- II. As Steph shared, we are celebrating Advent with our series, "They Didn't See It Coming." Who are the "they?" As Bob, one of our pastors, said last week, the "they" are the prophets Isaiah, Micah, Mary the mother of our Savior, Joseph his adopted father, the shepherds, the wise men and of course Herod perhaps the Not So Great. None of these biblical characters truly knew what hit them...the magnitude of the moment when Jesus, who we believe was God in the flesh, entered our world.

- III. So back to the villain of the Christmas story, King Herod. **Matthew 2: 1-12 + 16-18 (VV 1-2)** Notice how quickly Matthew sums up the birth story? This may surprise us, but only in the gospel of Luke do we get anything about the census, about the very pregnant and probably moody Mary and the scared to death Joseph having to hoof it all the way to Bethlehem, about the "No Vacancy" sign at the inn, or anything about the singing angels while the shepherds watched over their flock at night. Only Luke's gospel tells this part of the Christmas story. Mark is completely mum on it. He doesn't start his gospel until Jesus was thirty. In John's gospel the birth story is told more like a poem minus the entire Christmas story cast. Even Mother Mary doesn't make the cut. Matthew takes a different approach. He fast forwards us to around a year or two after Jesus' birth. He introduces us to the Magi, sometimes translated as Wise Men. We will say more about these guys in the weeks to come but in short, Magi were like a combination of an astrologer, astronomer, a scientist and (no surprise) a magician...but not the kind that pulls bunnies out of their hats. They were respected by most throughout the East and Middle East. Very educated and, well, considered wise. In case you are a history nerd like me, **Herod's reign was from about 37 BC to 3 BC, give or take a year.** The events that occurred here in Matthew happened towards the very end of Herod's reign. (V 3) I love Matthew's subtlety here. It's kind of like in my family "if momma ain't happy, no one is happy." In this case if King Herod ain't happy no one is happy. You will find out why in minute. (V 11) Did you catch that? Where did the Magi go? To a barn, or cave, where they kept the livestock? No, they came to the house. In Luke's birth story Mary, Joseph and Jesus couldn't even find a bedbug-infested, discounted room at Bethlehem's Hotel 6. But now they are living in their very own casa. So yes, time has passed. And unlike the Hallmark cards, most Christmas plays, and nearly every nativity set we have in our homes, the whole cast of the Christmas story were never on the "stage" at the same time. The Magi missed the shepherds and the angels by at least a year or so. Hate to be the one to break that to you.

- IV. So if you didn't know before now, you see why it's appropriate to call Herod the villain of the Christmas story. But who really was Herod? We get kind of a one-dimensional portrait from gospels but like many people's Facebook status these days his story is "complicated." Like with the rest of us Herod wasn't all bad and he certainly wasn't all good. **(image)** He was born in Edom **(image)** which was southeast of Judea in 73 BC. The people in this region called Idumeans were forced to convert to Judaism in the 2nd Century BC. They were never fully accepted by most of the Jews and were viewed as half breeds of sorts. So Herod started out his life as an outsider and was never really accepted by his ethnically Jewish subjections. His father was a public official high up in Roman court. Julius Caesar rewarded Herod's family for loyal service to Rome by appointing Herod as governor of Galilee. When Herod was a young man his father was assassinated by a Jewish extremist who wanted to free Israel of Rome and rid the country of Idumeans. So Herod experienced ethnic hatred first hand. Julius Caesar was assassinated the year before. "Et Tu Brute?" For a short time there was anarchy as Rome went through a brutal civil war. Herod though, as he would his whole career, not only landed on his feet but landed in the bird cage sticking with the whole cat metaphor. Barely escaping Judea, he fled to Rome where the new emperor, Mark Antony, and the senate appointed him King of the region and sent him back with an army to reclaim it, which he did. In short, Herod had an incredible gift of self-preservation. He always managed to land sunny side up. He was also a skilled diplomat, a good administrator, and built some of the most beautiful building projects of the ancient world, including the Temple in Jerusalem **(image)** that dwarfed Solomon's temple before it and Caesarea, **(image)** one of the grandest ports in that part of the world.
- V. So maybe King Herod was great after all? And maybe, as some scholars suggested, Matthew made up the bit about killing all the boys into Bethlehem to add a drama to the Christmas tale? Or make his Jewish readers conjure up memories from the Old Testament about the Pharaoh killing of Jewish baby boys when Moses was born? But not so fast. King Herod had a side darker than Vader. Like the late Castro, Herod didn't take kindly to political opponents. He either locked them up or usually just had them killed. As Herod aged he became ruthless. He had ten wives and a brood of children. Instead of seeing them as his beloved flesh and blood, he saw them as potential rivals for the throne. He habitually killed off his sons and their families. Even his wives were fair game. His favorite wife was Mariamne. He worried so much that one of his sons would assassinate him and marry her that he had Mariamne and her mother, along with several other of her relatives, executed. This led one of the foremost historians of the day to say, "Herod? That cat is cray, cray." It sounds better in Latin. Even Emperor Augustus heard about Herod's wholesale family slaughtering...and remarked, "I'd rather be Herod's pig than Herod's son" which supposedly in Latin is a real hoot because it's a pun. Lots of Latin humor in this. Towards the end of Herod's life, he worried that no one would mourn his death. So while he was on his death bed, he ordered thousands of prominent Jews across Judea to be dragged to the Hippodrome **(image)** in Jericho. He ordered archers to fill them with arrows as soon as he died so there would be mourning throughout Israel. In short, if Herod was willing to off his own sons and wives and the Jewish elite, it's safe to say he would order the butchering of

about 20 or so toddlers in Bethlehem to protect his throne. Yet King Herod had a generous and soft side too. In fact, on several occasions during famine, King Herod distributed food, buying it out of his own pocket. Once he even sold his own silverware to purchase baklava for the impoverished. He also lowered taxes twice to help the poor when the economy tanked.

- VI.** So yes, Herod is the villain of the Christmas story but a complicated one...a villain to most, a hero to a few, and even an object of sympathy to some as he was outsider his whole life. And what Herod didn't see coming was the kind of King Jesus would be. He expected one like himself, a ruler that ruled with an iron thumb, who exerted power through force and might, who protected his throne by sword and spear and who consorted with the rich and powerful. Had he only known that Jesus would be a king that didn't care about titles and palaces, who welcomed the outcast, and who reigned not by harsh law but by unconditional love, things might have been different. But how could he have known? So Herod persecuted not only the village of Bethlehem, but Jewish people far and wide. Yet what is amazing is that despite this, Mary, Joseph, the wise men and the others didn't let Herod's cruelty stifle the joy of the coming of the King. They were able to find light in the darkness. So how about you and me? Did you know that in 2015 more Christians were killed for their faith than any year before? In fact, according to Christian Freedom International, a Christian is martyred every 5 minutes somewhere in the world. Every five minutes a follower of Jesus is killed because s/he worships the Prince of Peace. Astounding. Here is the thing... though we don't face the persecution like the Jews during Herod's reign, and we certainly don't face it now like our brothers and sisters in other places of the world, yet we still somehow manage to miss much of the joy of the Christmas season.
- VII.** But I know what some might say. Wait Ron, we are persecuted! Remember last year...the battle over the holiday cup at Starbucks? If you have forgotten let me remind us. Starbucks came out last Christmas with a plain red cup (**image**) instead one with Christmas symbols like ornaments and reindeer. Despite the fact that ornaments and reindeer really have nothing to do with the real Christmas story, a Christian blogger brought this to our collective attention. He claimed that featureless red cup proved that Starbucks hates Jesus and decried the persecution of Christians in our country. His remedy was to get people to tell baristas that their name was "Merry Christmas" to trick them to write it on the cup. Ha! That will show those heathens, right? Okay, I don't mean to offend anyone here but I am sorry...having to drink overpriced coffee out of a blank red cup is *not* persecution in light of what Mary and Joseph had to deal with. And going one step further, neither is a salesperson saying "Happy Holidays." And letting these small petty things upset us can steal the joy of the season. So what if instead of screaming "Merry Christmas" in the face of an overwhelmed salesperson, we practice or live out a Merry Christmas by acting like Christ? Maybe say something merry, or just try being kind and considerate rather than an obnoxious? What if instead of berating baristas we compliment their caffeine creations and leave a tip? This would be living out a Merry Christmas instead of shouting it. Again, we don't have a clue what real persecution is like. So let's drop the chip on our shoulder.

VIII. Okay so we don't face real opposition like Mary, Joseph, and the Magi but realistically we do face many annoyances during this season that can legit kill the joy. Am I right? Last Saturday my family made our annual pilgrimage to the mountains to Lil Grandfather Christmas Tree farm to pick out our tree. A tradition started when the girls were young. We usually go on Black Friday but it got delayed a day. Let me just tell you, never, and I mean never, go to the lil Grandfather Christmas tree farm on the Saturday after Thanksgiving at 11:30am in the morning. Half of Winston was there. No, I am serious. I did a head count. Just the line for the one bathroom was Space Mountain long. And the line for the tractor ride up the mountain was twice that. I found myself calculating the most efficient way we could grab our tree, tie it to the car, and get the heck out of there. About that time Megan, my wife, leaned over to me and said, "Isn't it so nice? We don't have any schedule to keep but can just relax and enjoy the moment." She was so right. I was so focused on just getting 'er done, checking the "tree acquisition" box, that I missed the point of this family tradition. If it is not to enjoy the time of being together, of slowing down and savoring the Christmas season, why else drive 70 miles away, take a crowded hay ride on the back of a tractor to climb up a cold windy mountain to get a tree that costs twice as much as one you could buy at Food Lion? I was letting a small annoyance of waiting in line rob me of the sheer pleasure of being with some of those I love most, preparing to celebrate our coming King. The same is true if we get bent out of shape when someone takes our parking space at the mall, cuts in line at Target, or when we have to go to the obligatory office party and watch our boss do a spiked eggnog rendition of "Ju Ju on that beat." Instead of letting these things get us down, let us pause and rejoice in the fact we have the freedom to publicly rejoice and celebrate Christmas as millions of brothers and sisters around the world don't. Celebrate that we don't have a murderous King Herod breathing down our collective neck.

IX. Lastly, I do recognize that although we are not really persecuted and only have minor annoyances to deal with, some of us here do find it hard to celebrate Jesus' birth because they have lost loved ones this past year, and this season brings this truth painfully home. And there are some here that suffer from anxiety, depression, SAD or other disorders, and it's hard to be merry when you are feeling like you're trapped in the dark. In both cases these can be as emotionally oppressive as political oppression. As internally hurtful as external violence. I know this first hand as I have shared before my own personal battle with depression that worsens during these winter months. There are times like this past week where I wanted to go hide in a cave...or maybe a cruise ship in Bahamas. So how can we celebrate Jesus when our hearts are so heavy? These things can steal our momentary happiness to be sure, but it can't take that deep abiding joy knowing that the Herods of this world won't get the last word. That the light of Christ that has come will one day eradicate the dark for good, and that death, with the coming of Jesus, has been undone. And we better believe that no one saw this kind of king coming, especially Herod. But how could they? Yet with the help of hindsight, we have....so don't let anything, including perceived persecution, bad mall drivers, or even mental illness stand in our way of rejoicing in the coming of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, the God who moved into our neighborhood and came near.