

It's December 8, which means that most of us are at least waist-deep in Christmas parties, Christmas shopping and Secret Santas and Christmas lists and... well, I don't have to tell you. This is easily the busiest time of year for our church family: from Breakfast with Santa and our Community Choir concert to Kid Again, the Pop Opera and Christmas Eve gatherings, it seems like we run about 120 mph toward December 25.

And particularly if you're here, worshiping this morning, you at least have a vague sense that all this stuff we're doing is ultimately about a baby born in a town called Bethlehem, in a barn 2,000 years ago, a baby who creation and heaven announced to be the king of all kings, the sovereign over all sovereigns (as Sheila showed us last week).

In the Church, this four-week period leading up to Christmas day is called Advent, which means "coming". It's a time of waiting and preparing for Jesus to come into our lives. This year, we're on the Road to Bethlehem. We've all seen a nativity scene before (most of us probably even own one or two). Kings, shepherds, angels, animals, a mother, a father and a baby.

It's a deceptively simple scene, because every character in the scene had a very different journey to the manger. Every character followed a different path, but they all ended up here, at the manger, kneeling before the infinite, uncreated creator become a finite, helpless infant lying in a trough used to feed livestock.

Today, then, I want to invite you to take a deep breath. Whatever craziness filled your week before you came, it brought you here, now. Whatever insanity is waiting for you at 11:45 when you leave, you're here now. So breathe deep.

Use this space to look at all the stuff that fills your holiday season: your work, your family, your parties and shopping and reunions. The good and the bad, the beautiful and painful.

Because depending on how you leave from this space, all that will either transform you or bind you. You'll find either freedom or frustration. And what matters is whether you've walked the road to the manger or not.

Obviously over the course of Advent, we'll learn the stories of the shepherds, of Mary and Joseph and of Jesus himself. But before we hear their stories, we should note who is conspicuously absent from this Nativity scene. Someone who by all rights should've been there.

When we understand this person's journey, why he *didn't* choose to walk the road to Bethlehem, we see that Jesus' birth was a *threat* to him, and if we're not careful, it might be a threat to us, too.

I'm talking about a man called Herod the Great, the king of Judea at the time Jesus was born. His story is in Matthew 2. We heard it read this morning, but turn there if you have your bibles. If you're using one of the Bibles you grabbed off the shelves on the way in, Matthew 2 is on page XXXX. And if you don't own a bible, we'd love for you to consider that an early Christmas gift from us to you.

While you turn there, a bit more about Herod: as the king of God's people, Herod should've been first in line to welcome God's messiah. In the ancient world, especially in the Near East, the king was an earthly representative of God. The king's first job was to represent God to the people, to

rule as God rules. In the Scriptures, a king was judged as good or bad not based on whether he was politically astute, or provided for a good national defense, how well he balanced the budget or provided for a growing GDP, but by how faithfully he presented himself as a picture of God to the people.

Israel's greatest king was David. Despite his well-documented moral failings, David became the quintessential king of God's people. God even made a promise to David that the King who would one day usher in God's eternal earthly kingdom would be David's descendant.

So if Herod had been a good king, he'd have been thrilled when the foreign magicians showed up asking about the Messiah - that promised son of David. If he was faithfully representing God to the people, then he should've been first in line to celebrate the final arrival of God's promised king of all kings.

And while he tricks the magicians, our narrator Matthew lets us know that Herod's intentions for Jesus aren't good at all. When the magicians come to him looking for the newly born king of Israel, 12:3 tells us that

King Herod was deeply disturbed when he heard this, as was everyone in Jerusalem. -- Matthew 12:3

So later, when he charges the magicians to: "Go to Bethlehem and search carefully for the child. And when you find him, come back and tell me so that I can go and worship him, too!" -- Matthew 2:1-8

We are suspicious. And we're right: God warns the magicians not to return to Herod. So they bypass Jerusalem on their way home. When Herod finds out, he's livid:

Herod was furious when he realized that the wise men had outwitted him. He sent soldiers to kill all the boys in and around Bethlehem who were two years old and under, based on the wise men's report of the star's first appearance. -- Matthew 2:16

Could reaction be further from what Herod *should've* done? Rather than come to kneel at the manger, Herod sends a wave of death and destruction. Why? Why did a powerful, wealthy old king like Herod feel so threatened by a toddler born and raised in poverty?

It's probably obvious to you by now, but Herod was not particularly interested in being a king who looked like God. Herod saw himself as a king on his *own* throne, not a king on God's throne.

Herod wasn't a descendant of David; in fact, he was only half-Jewish, something that made all the Jewish people he ruled over very upset. You might wonder how he even got to be king in the first place if that was the case.

And the simplest answer is that Herod was very, very shrewd. Around the time Herod was 10, the Roman Empire conquered Israel. And by the time Herod was an adult, Rome was in the midst of a Civil War: Julius Caesar had been assassinated, and his adopted nephew Octavian was battling Mark Antony for control of the Roman throne.

Because Antony was ruling from Egypt (with Cleopatra), Herod backed Antony, who rewarded him by declaring him king of the Jews. But then Octavian defeated Antony and Cleopatra, so Herod found himself on the losing side.

Octavian declared himself Caesar Augustus, and one of the ways he consolidated his power was by offering former enemies amnesty. Herod was in this group: Augustus allowed Herod to keep his position as king of the Jews in exchange for Herod's total, unswerving allegiance to Augustus.

You can imagine Herod's position, right? Swear allegiance or die. Bend the knee to Augustus or lose your head. It's a no-brainer. Herod swore to Augustus. He built Roman Temples in Israel and dedicated them to Augustus. He built a whole port city and called it "Caesarea Maritima" - Caesar by the Sea. All to prove to Augustus how loyal he was. [I'm imagining a map, with more and more pressures on Herod in the middle]

But that didn't make the Jewish people happy at all. From their perspective, Herod was a traitor to his own people and to God. He built idols, inviting foreign gods into their land. Anger, resentment was fomenting against Herod. And Herod knew there were two quick ways to lose his throne: to rebel against Rome, or for his people to rebel against him.

So he kept the Jewish people happy (or at least not quite mad enough to rebel) by renovating the temple in Jerusalem. Herod spent the equivalent of millions of dollars to transform the rinky-dink rebuilt temple in Jerusalem into one of the most impressive temples in the whole world, rivaling temples in Rome, Egypt and Greece.

And this marvelous, world-class Temple kept the Jewish people happy enough. [More pressure lines] They still didn't love Herod, but he's clearly not *all* bad. Plenty of the Jewish elites knew how temperamental Rome could be, so they worked with Herod, helping him maintain his rule.

There's one more piece of background you need to know for this picture to make sense: in Herod's day, Rome was the biggest empire in the world. But second to Rome was the Parthian Empire [highlighted on map, more pressure lines]. Parthia is the Persian Empire - modern day Iran, and in the decades surrounding Jesus' birth, they were a huge threat to the Eastern edge of Rome's Empire, which just so happens to be where Herod's kingdom was.

And Parthia is where the magicians were from.

So imagine you're Herod. You're old - you don't know it yet, but you'll be dead in a couple more years. And you've held this kingdom together for decades mainly by your own ability to wheel and deal. Your ability to balance proving to Rome you're loyal and keeping your people just happy enough not to rebel.

And suddenly, out of nowhere, a diplomatic envoy from Rome's chief rival - Parthia! - shows up to pay homage to an alleged new king of Israel.

Herod saw what these magicians were doing through the only eyes he had: political eyes. As far as Herod could tell, these Parthian astrologers were trying to make a new alliance with Israel's new king. They were trying to foster rebellion against Rome, trying to take Israel's strategic location and add it to the strength of the Parthian empire.

Herod was afraid for his own life. He knew if Augustus got wind of the magicians' visit they would assume Herod was working against Rome as he had once before.

So he lashes out quickly and decisively: he orders the deaths of any child who might be this new king. He showed Rome that he was still their man.

Herod had spent his entire life carefully balancing, keeping everyone happy so that he could maintain his throne. And Jesus' birth threatened that balance. He threatened to topple Herod's palace of cards. So Herod lashed out.

Now I know none of us in here has ever ordered the deaths of infants. That's why we look at Herod and think, What a monster! He's nothing like me!

And there's an important level on which that's true. But there's another sense in which we are somewhat like Herod. Particularly in this time of year, we feel pressed on all sides, torn by rival commitments and activities and... well you know. You're living it. [super-impose the graphic]

And that constant press, that need to be all things to all people, to make everyone happy, to get to every party and find the perfect gift for everyone, to see *them* again, to make the annual trek to the parents or grandparents or kids, all this can drain you. It can stretch you so thin that you miss the manger.

Like Herod, you may forget to walk the road to Bethlehem altogether. You could get so caught up in Christmas that you miss Christ.

You don't have to. In fact, none of the activities I just listed are *bad* in and of themselves. They all have the potential to be good, life-giving. They can all lead you *to* the manger. Or they can keep you from it.

It's hard to tell the difference.

Much like Herod's throne room. You have the Parthian magicians who're saying, Where is the Christ? We want to worship him!

And you have Herod, who's saying, Where is the Christ? I want to worship him too!

Though they look the same, one of them is being dishonest. His heart is in the wrong place.

So too with us. As we walk this Christmas road we walk every year, will we arrive at Bethlehem? Will we come to Jesus himself, allow him to threaten the precarious lives we've set up for ourselves?

Can we imagine that Christmas, instead of propping up the lives we maintain throughout the rest of the year could actually be the beginning of a whole new life?

We were not created to build little kingdoms for ourselves, to prop ourselves up as kings and queens of our own little castles, maintaining our kingdoms by doing our best to keep the gods and powers above us and the people around us happy.

We were created to be pictures of God in this world. To be loving and joyful and peaceful and patient and kind and generous and faithful and gentle and self-controlled. To love God and to love the people in our lives. To give ourselves for their good.

And during this time of Advent, as we wait for Jesus' coming into this world, as we look forward to the birth of the King of all Kings, the ruler of all rulers, we, like Herod, have the opportunity to walk away from life we've been building, the exhausting tension of trying to hold it all together, to make everyone happy (when that's never going to happen).

If we walk the road to Bethlehem, allow Jesus to challenge our kingdom building, we can recover our original purpose - to be faithful pictures of God, and all those holiday events we participate in can be transformed. Not on the outside, but from within, as we learn to seize each moment, each party, each interaction and gift exchange, as an opportunity to be a picture of Jesus.

Will that trip to visit the family be an annual trial to be endured, or can I inject some kindness, peace and joy into a stressful situation?

Will that work party be full of snark and competition, or can I model love, generosity and self-control?

Will my gifts be secret attempts to one-up or achieve some status? Or will I reflect the selfless, loving generosity of the God who has given us everything?

Will I walk that road to Bethlehem, or will I miss it, like Herod did?

You can fake it and fool everyone. Herod did, until it was too late. And in the end, it didn't matter. He could not thwart God's kingdom, and his ended in fear, insanity and loneliness.

Jesus has come into the world, and God is even now making all things new. This Christmas, will you join God in the restoration of all things, or will you continue to build your own kingdom, one that's destined to fail and fall?

Examine:

1. What is one way I've allowed Jesus to transform my life?
2. What is one way Jesus threatens the life I'm building?
3. In this Advent season, how will I be tempted to ignore or avoid Jesus?
4. What is one concrete way I can say Yes to Jesus?

Communion Set Up