

Welcome

Today is New Year's Day! It's also the 8th Day of Christmas, so we're celebrating new life and change! After all, don't we all hope that the New Year brings change? And that's part and parcel of our Christmas celebration, too!

Think of your favorite Christmas movies - the Grinch, A Christmas Carol, Elf... they all revolve around someone changing. Even the much maligned Hallmark movies are about someone changing, discovering the TRUE MEANING of Christmas, which is peace, joy, love and hope.

But what about the ones who DON'T change? Like ole Hans Gruber in Die Hard? Or Jacob Marley - Scrooge's old partner who's long dead? Or the ex-boyfriend in the Hallmark movies who can't believe she wants to leave her city life for this boring small town?

We all know that the Grinch's heart doesn't always grow three sizes. Sometimes the bad guy doesn't change. Sometimes Scrooges stay selfish.

What do we do, then? When the powerful cling to their power? When evil men persist in their evil ways? In this season of hope and possibility, how do we respond?

Today, we're going to look at the story of the original grinch of Christmas, King Herod. We're going to face that part of the story we so often want to skip over.

Because the painful truth is that we might be more like him than we want to admit. So we're going to begin this new year by taking an honest look at ourselves.

We can do that because we serve a God who loves us unconditionally. God loves every Grinch, Scrooge and yes, even Herod. So that means God loves us too.

Message

Today is the eighth Day of Christmas! Yes, it's also New Year's day, which means it's a double feast day. We're just over halfway through our celebration that Jesus was born into the world. Christmas is a sign of God's promise not to abandon us. Because Jesus became part of our world, we can be certain God will return to reclaim this world.

Our Advent series this year was called, "I'll Be Home for Christmas," and it's been about us imagining the world as it will be when Jesus returns.

Today, as we bring this series to a close, we're going to explore a part of the Christmas story we tend to ignore: Herod's attempt to kill Jesus and his family. It's understandable that we want to avoid stories of violence this time of year. We're trying to enjoy peace on earth and goodwill to all people. Doesn't all that violence get in the way? Isn't that exactly what we're trying to escape?

Well, no. If you were with us that first Sunday of Advent, you'll remember we confronted the idea of Christmas as escapism head on. Christmas is the *opposite* of escapism. Christmas is not God swooping in to pull us all out of the world. It's God entering into our world to confront the forces of evil and injustice. That's *why* the Christmas story is good news.

None of this is subtle... Luke opens his version of the Christmas story by reminding us who claims to run the world:

At that time the Roman emperor, Augustus, decreed that a census should be taken throughout the Roman Empire. (This was the first census taken when Quirinius was governor of Syria.) -- Luke 2:1-2 (NLT)

And both Luke and Matthew note that Herod is ruling over Judea. That would be the so-called Herod the Great, who was Rome's puppet king (more on that in a bit).

So the Gospel writers understood Jesus' arrival wasn't an isolated, individualistic thing. It was a political story - the birth of a new king. We should expect that the rulers of the world will have a strong reaction to such news.

Empires have always used peace as propaganda, positioning themselves as champions of peace for all while narrowly defining 'all' as really 'just the people who obey the empire'.

This is true in our day and age, and it was true in the world into which Jesus was born.

Turn with us to [Matthew 2](#).

To understand what's happening in today's Scripture, we need to think politically. The amount of intrigue and betrayal behind today's story sounds more like an episode of *Game of Thrones* than something we expect to find in the Bible.

But don't forget - Jesus came into a world with the same pains and problems as ours. And his coming is *good news* for all of us who feel weighed down by the violence of the world.

So let's talk about Herod the Great.

By the time Jesus was born, Herod was an old man (he's actually only going to live another few years, though he doesn't know that yet). Herod was born in a world where his homeland - Israel, had been independent for about a hundred years.

Understanding Herod's world is easier if you think of East Asia during the Cold War of the late 20th century. Countries like Afghanistan and Vietnam became the sites of major conflict not because they were particularly powerful themselves, but because they were client states of the global superpowers - Russia and the US. These two countries didn't want to go directly to war with each other - it would be too costly. So instead they sort of played global chess, manipulating other countries around the globe to try to gain power and influence.

That's exactly what Israel was in Herod's childhood. The two global empires were Rome to the West and Parthia to the east. Israel was the country right between them, and the empires' cold war had a massive impact on Herod's life. He ended up as a puppet king, played by famous names like Mark Antony and Caesar Augustus.

By the time he was in his 40s, Herod's only job was to keep Israel peaceful and allied with the Roman Empire. And here's the thing - for thirty years, Herod made good on his promise. Under Herod, Israel enjoyed a long stretch of peaceful prosperity. And, more importantly for Herod, Caesar Augustus didn't have to worry about problems coming from the Parthians. The East was quite.

Until Herod received some visitors:

Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the reign of King Herod. About that time some wise men from eastern lands arrived in Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose, and we have come to worship him."

King Herod was deeply disturbed when he heard this, as was everyone in Jerusalem. --
Matthew 2:1–3 (NLT)

Matthew tells us these visitors are *magoi*, which is a Greek term that refers to a specific kind of astrologer employed by the Parthian empire.

So put away your nativity set for a moment and listen to the story Matthew is telling: Herod is ruling from his palace in Jerusalem as Rome's client king when an envoy from Rome's arch-rivals shows up asking to worship the new king.

This is a political move. The same empire that tried to steal Israel away from Rome forty years ago is at it again. Herod is caught off guard - what new king are they talking about? And more importantly, how can he get ahead of this before Caesar Augustus finds out? (Remember - he's not going to get a third chance.)

So Herod devises a plan - he pretends an alliance with these Persian astrologers. He sends them to Bethlehem and asks they return to see him on their way home. But they don't; they're warned in a dream to evade Herod, and they do.

Is your head spinning yet? Does this Christmas story feel more fraught than you're used to? Do the stakes seem higher? We're not just dealing with a baby born in a manger. We're dealing with global superpowers waging a cold war over a client kingdom. And somehow, that cold war has come to turn on a baby born to an otherwise completely forgettable couple in a village whose one claim to fame is that they're the birthplace of an ancient king.

And yet, friends, this *is* the Christmas Story. God is at work, even on a global stage. And God's opposition to evil empires looks like this: a small baby. A forgotten village. An anonymous, unimportant couple. God's work looks like you and me.

Song

This is the part of the story that's horrific. Many of you already know what's coming: Herod orders the deaths of all the boys in Bethlehem who are two years old or younger.

Is there anything more monstrous?

I would say no, there's not.

I want you to remember that as we dive into what's happening here. My first question is this: how many boys do you think we're talking about here?

A hundred? Five hundred? A few thousand?

Based on the data we have available to us, our best estimate is that, in the time Jesus was born, there were somewhere between 6 and 10 boys two years old or younger.

Ten kids.

Does that make Herod's order any less horrific? For me, it does not. Ten kids or a hundred or ten thousand, it's evil.

But let's imagine ourselves in Herod's place:

You barely remember a world without war. By the time you were ten, your father was already fighting. You've spent your whole life fighting and striving for peace and security and you've actually done it. You've achieved what your father couldn't, what even the great Julius Caesar couldn't: you've gained your people three decades of peace.

Then the magi from Parthia show up, offering an alliance with some new king.

You know what this means. You've seen it before. Israel is about to be engulfed in war again, torn apart in Rome and Parthia's cold war burning hot again.

So you think fast. The child is at most two years old? There are maybe ten such boys in Bethlehem? The math is easy for someone like Herod: ten boys now or a thousand in the coming war.

Surely a small sacrifice is worth the peace. Surely ten nameless kids are in fact a small price to pay for a nation's peace?

And so we have Matthew's awful story:

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. Herod's brutal action fulfilled what God had spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

"A cry was heard in Ramah—

weeping and great mourning.

Rachel weeps for her children,

refusing to be comforted,

for they are dead." -- Matthew 2:16–18 (NLT)

Friends, we should never excuse the wickedness of Herod in this story. We can *understand* his motivations. We can recognize that his goal - peace and national security - might have been noble. But we must look at how he went about it:

Herod decided someone was expendable. In this case, he identified poor, marginalized and defenseless kids and their families.

Herod decided *they* would pay the price of security for him and his nation. BY doing so, Herod drew a line between us and them. To keep US safe, THEY pay the price.

This is the logic of empire.

And we might claim to be against Herod's behavior, but most of us think nothing of the US military's use of drones in the Middle East. In fact, they make us feel safe, because we're told they keep our soldiers safe while also eliminating terrorist targets.

But the reality is that those drone strikes have killed more than 2,000 civilians - including almost 500 children. All in the name of peace and national security.

For whom? Well for us. Not for *them* - for them it's terror and weeping. The can be said of the enslaved families torn apart at the auction block in the name of profit and security. Or the thousands of Native children the US kidnapped from families and placed in Church-run boarding schools. Or the families seeking asylum over the last several years at our southern border, families torn apart once again in the name of security and stability for US.

Friends, this is a new year. It's the first day of 2023. We live in a world that is as tumultuous and overwhelming as the world into which Jesus was born. And now more than ever, it's easy for us to ignore the vulnerable in our world in the name of convenience.

But our story begins under Herod's reign of terror. Jesus was not in the palace, but the village. He's the one on the run, the family seeking asylum. To be his Church is to stand with those the empire considers expendable.

And I know that this message has been big, messy and overwhelming. I know even now, you feel probably paralyzed, maybe a little guilty.

So let me tell you that, in 2023, I hope Catalyst continues to press into being a congregation that works for the good of *everyone*, starting with those on the margins. Because the Christmas story reminds us that it's not our responsibility to topple empires. That's God's job. Our job is simply to go where God is. To the village, to the manger. We show up where God is, and follow God.

Communion + Examen

God leads us to this table - another small, simple reminder that we all matter.

Who do I encounter who is marginalized or vulnerable?

How am I tempted to ignore them in the name of my own security or comfort?

How is God calling me to be present to them in this next year?

Assignment + Blessing

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