

Herod Christians

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The Second Sunday after Christmas
Epiphany Sunday
Holy Communion
January 3, 2010

Isaiah 60:1-6; Ephesians 3:1-10; Matthew 2:1-12

Many of us have read or seen Barbara Robinson's class story, *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*, in which the wrong sort of family from the wrong side of the tracks stumbles into the leading roles of a Christmas pageant at a respectable, middle-class Protestant church.

The Herdman children – Imogene, Ralph, Gladys, Ollie, and the others – showed up in Sunday School when they heard that snacks were being distributed, and that also happened to be the day parts were being assigned for the annual pageant. The Herdmans were what we'd call today “unchurched,” so when they first heard the story of Jesus' birth, they didn't accept a great deal of it at face value. Imogene found it a bit offensive, for example, that the angel Gabriel told Mary what she should name her baby; Imogene thought that was a mother's prerogative and quite sensibly would've name the baby Bill.

For the Herdmans, using dirty words, hitting each other, and smoking the occasional cigar in the church bathroom were all part of normal life, so when the character of Herod appeared in the biblical story of Jesus' birth, they were all ears. Here's what Robinson writes about that relationship:

And so it went, Mother telling the story and explaining it to the Herdmans. They were really interested in Herod. When mother said that Herod planned to put the baby Jesus to death, Imogene exclaimed:

Imogene: My God? He just got born and already they're out to kill him!

I figured they were interested in Herod because they liked him. He was so mean he could have been their ancestor—Herod Herdmam.

Herod the Great may or may not have been a distance ancestor of the Herdman family, but our text for this morning suggests that many of us may bear more than a passing resemblance to the bad guy of Judea: “When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him.”

Herod was bad, to be sure, but Matthew comes a bit closer to the underlying truth about Herod when he says that he was frightened. Herod was frightened at the news that a new king of the Jews had been born, and that wise men had heard this news in their distant homeland.

This was troubling news to a king whose thirty-year hold on his throne had been shaky even in the best of times. Herod had foiled repeated attempts to remove him from power, and had executed at least three of his own sons for trying to overthrow their

father. So the news of yet another rival to the Judean throne frightened the aged and failing Herod, and all those in Jerusalem – and there must've been many if Matthew says “all Jerusalem” -- who looked to Herod for their security and power.

Change is always threatening to those in power, and the fear that powerful people feel when they sense change is imminent often causes them to do terrible things. We know from Matthew how Herod reacted to this threat to his rule: he massacred all the male children under two years of age in and around Bethlehem. Jesus escaped that fate by being taken by his family to Egypt, where they lived until Herod died in the year 4 BC.

As rulers go, Herod the Great wasn't particularly bad. He sounds awful to us because we've inherited only selected bits of his story, not all of which may be historically accurate. But if you put Herod in the long line of people who've exercised power and struggled to hold onto it, you'll see that Lord Acton's axiom about the corrupting effect of power is true: power does corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

Power corrupts those who have it and those who want it, and although it's unlikely that any of us will ever come to the personal power of a Herod – or an Alexander or a Stalin or a Pol Pot – we are all nonetheless part of the world's remaining superpower, and as a people we are loathe to admit that our power has corrupted us – it's made us frightened, as Herod was and all Jerusalem with him.

The financial crisis that has engulfed the global economic system has frightened all of us, and in our fear over our own financial futures, we've lost sight of many of the concerns that once demanded our attention and still need that attention. No one mentions the suffering in Darfur, for instance; when we're worried about our own jobs and our own homes and our own neighborhoods, it's hard to remember that our calling as Christians is to keep our neighbors' welfare uppermost in our hearts and minds, second only to our love of God. Fear of our economic future can cause us to turn inward and neglectful of the larger issues that don't go away just because we're having problems of our own.

Karl Menninger, the famous psychiatrist, once said that his advice to patients who thought they might be having a nervous breakdown was to lock up their house, go to a poor section of town, and do something useful for somebody there. Menninger found through long clinical experience that altruism was one of the best therapies for people suffering from a range of mental problems. Drawing people out of themselves – out of their fears, out of their worries, out of their preoccupation with themselves – often did more than drugs or sessions in a therapist's office to help people recover their long-term mental and spiritual health.

The Christian church has always known this. We've known it since Jesus said that the two greatest commandments are to love God above everything and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. Herod and those frightened with him in Jerusalem didn't get that. Herod and those who looked to him for security didn't understand – didn't believe – that true security, true freedom from fear, comes not from trying to destroy our perceived threats before they destroy us, but from seeing the world as God sees it and from loving the world as God loves it.

God's love is greater than any threat for those who truly believe the gospel of Jesus

Christ. It's not for Herod Christians, of course – those Christians who say they believe in Jesus Christ but live as though they believe in Herod and what he represents – but for those who are prepared to live God's realm right here, right now in this world, nothing, finally, can do them ultimate harm.

God became human, the medieval theologians insisted, so that we might become divine. In this season of the incarnation, when we celebrate God's presence with us as one of us, we celebrate not the Herods of this world – with their power, their brutality, and their fear – but that love of God, that perfect love, that casts out fear.

“You shall know the truth,” the Gospel of John tells us, “and the truth shall set you free.” The freedom the world needs, my friends, most desperately, is not freedom from political oppression or the tyranny of global markets controlled by a handful of the obscenely rich. The freedom the world needs – we need – is freedom from fear. The fear that gripped Herod and those with him and like him, who feared the change God's presence brings.

The truth is that we have nothing to fear from living God's realm in this world and everything to gain. That's the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. So help us God. Amen.