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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
12/26/2010, The First Sunday of Christmas, A
Matthew 2:13-23
Foolish King Herod

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Ahh! We have a sad Gospel story today. How quickly we slip from the charm and joy of the holy birth of our Saviour down into the realities of wrath, murder, and heartbreak. Here is my text:

¹⁶Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, was in a furious rage, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time which he had ascertained from the wise men.

Some people are flat out fools. Herod was such a one! He was not a fool because he allowed himself to be tricked by the wise men. No, he was a fool because he was so cruel.

Herod took off the gloves. There was no pretence with him. If Jesus is Lord, then Herod is not, but that was intolerable to the man. So he lashed out at any and all obstacles. It did not matter whether little children were in the way. The innocence of the children did not tug on his heart. The profound grief of their parents did not trouble him. The only thing that seems to have tugged at his heart was some good state of *himself*. The man was a fool. And one day, *he* is going to kneel before the very Child he tried to kill.

What a chilling line it is in our text when the story reaches the news of Herod's death. The line is told so very calmly:

¹⁹But when Herod *died*, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt... (Matthew 2:19, RSV)

His death is just a passing note in the story of Jesus. And so it is that Herod's earthly story is done. But not his eternal story. When he breathed his last, his greatest adventure now lay before him. That adventure is the day of his reckoning. That adventure all depends on what is Jesus going to do with him.

I have my own sins and they will be causing me much shame on that day when I kneel before Jesus, but at least I am *trying* to be faithful to our Lord. And so are you! We are not trying to murder him, but rather to worship him, to adore him, and to become like him. I think that is the better path than Herod's.

I read a novel recently in which the bad guy was a drug lord down in Mexico who had a lead on an immense store of methamphetamine up in South Dakota¹. The man was in his private jet, heading north to get those drugs. He has six gunmen with him, but he knows that those gunmen will not be returning home with him to Mexico. Why? Because each man weighs about two hundred pounds. That adds up to twelve hundred pounds. And the drug lord would much rather carry an additional twelve hundred pounds of methamphetamine with him back to Mexico than six living human beings. So he anticipates that he will leave them behind. Perhaps he means to kill them, taking them unaware.

There are people like that in this world. There are tyrants and pirates and neighborhood bullies who would as soon shoot you and smile at you. Fools, each of them!

The Bible has a pretty firm definition of the word “fool”:

The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God. They are corrupt, they have done abominable works, there is none that doeth good. (Psalm 14:1, KJV)

Herod was a fool because he said in his heart, “There is no God,” and then proceeded to conduct himself in a godless and cruel way.

The wise men had told him about a newborn king. Herod took that news and bent it in the most self-serving of ways. He could have said, “Praise God for this newborn king. The burdens of leadership weigh heavily on me. I am glad to bend the knee before God’s new king.” But instead, Herod rebels against the will of God and the flow of reality and resolves to kill this newborn king!

That is one possible way to greet Christ: instead of becoming his disciple, become his attempted murderer.

But, the ways of Herod are unworthy of you, no matter how much wealth and power they might promise! Do not take his path. Do not follow his cruel example.

Now, for the happier part of the sermon: Jesus is the true King. He is the one worth living for.

Oh! The contrast between Herod and Jesus!

King Herod lives in a palace. It is a palace haunted by the ghosts of people he has killed, including a wife and two sons. It was said of King Herod the Great that it was better to be Herod’s dog than his son.

So, Herod lives in a palace. He is accustomed to power and to luxury. He gets to wear a crown. He was known by Caesar Augustus and the Roman Senate. He was a player. No doubt his palace had rich tapestries and carpets, his table had plentiful and rich food, and his fireplace had plenty of dried hard wood to burn and to keep him warm.

Meanwhile, our Maker and Herod’s Maker, chooses to be born in a manger, in the dark and in the cold, except for whatever light and heat two travelers can

¹ Lee Child, *61 Hours*, (Delacorte Press, 2010)

manage to assemble -- yes, and one of them pregnant and near delivery. Why? Why does Jesus exchange the beauties and the glories of heaven for a humble barn? Because there are an awful lot of poor and struggling people in this world, and he chooses to stand at their side.

And there he remains to this day, always at the side of the lowly.

I have received many lovely Christmas cards this year, but the one that probably moved me the most was from a homeless man. He is a regular at our church office door. He has been knocking at our door for nearly my whole ministry. We will probably grow old together. The money you might drop in our church's poor box goes to support our Almoner's Fund, which in turn is used by Parish Secretary Karen Rombey and me to help along in some small measure those who seek alms from our church.

This Christmas, this particular poor man gave Christmas cards to Karen and me, which was touching. The card itself was pleasant and full of good wishes at Christmas time. But the thing that really moved me about the card, and made me hold it with almost a sense of reverence, was that there was no return address on the envelope. And what a world is contained in that absence! Of course, there is no return address. He is homeless. This absence of a return address is not because of carelessness, but homelessness.

Imagine what it would be like to be homeless at Christmas. Other people come and go, some of them tired from work, some of them bearing packages from shopping. They are going home. They have an address. But there are many people in our town who are not going home, for they have none.

Herod has a home. He has his fancy palace haunted by the ghosts of the people he has murdered.

But the true King of all creation has no home. He is born in someone else's barn. He enjoys the home of his parents as long as he lives with them, but when he is a grown man, out and about, he is homeless.

And Jesus saith unto him, The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head. (Matthew 8:20, KJV)

Why? Why is the Maker of heaven and earth, the one through all things were made and without whom nothing was made that was made (John 1), why was the Creator willing to be homeless? Well, he was willing to be homeless on earth that we might have a home in heaven. The truth is, none of us would have any certain home if Jesus were not the kind of man he is. Jesus is kindhearted toward the lowly. He is friendly not only toward the saints, but also toward the sinners. He is concerned that we should have a home – aye, an eternal home – even though our own resources might run out.

This is the great promise that we will take comfort in this afternoon when we do the memorial service for our former Coffee Hour worker, Barbara Al-Aridi. Christmas means that Jesus was homeless and identified himself with the lowly

and the sinners that Barbara will have a home forever. Indeed, Jesus speaks of “mansions” in his Father’s house -- mansions that King Herod can never stop the Holy Innocents of Bethlehem from inheriting:

²In my Father’s house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. ³And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also. (John 14:2-3, KJV)

Indeed, he remains at the side of all kinds of lowly -- not only the poor, struggling to the point of exhaustion with poverty, but also the sinners, burdened by guilt, struggling against temptations and bad habits, perhaps so discouraged that they doubt whether they can ever get life right again.

This is the Gospel! This is a crucial lesson of Christmas: Herod is not the Lord. Jesus is! Herod died and can no longer bedevil the world. But Jesus lives and therefore continues to bless the world. You could not walk with Herod if you tried, for he is not here to walk with. But you *can* walk with Jesus, for he is the kind of King who lives even now and who is glad for your company, who is lonely without you, and is willing to be the best friend you will have -- indeed the kind of Friend who makes you better in this earthly life and who fits you for heaven in the life to come, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.