



From the Community Pulpit

December 28, 2008

Peaceable Kingdom: Beyond Herod's Reach

#6 in the "Meet Me at the Manger!" series

Sunday Morning - 8:30 am & 10:30 am

Sermon by Rev. Kevin Snow

Pastoral Prayer by Dr. Robert Lee Hill

Offertory Invitation by Rev. Melissa St. Clair

✧ COMMUNITY CHRISTIAN CHURCH ✧ 4601 MAIN STREET ✧ KANSAS CITY ✧ MISSOURI ✧ 64112 ✧ 816.561.6531 ✧
WWW.COMMUNITY-CHRISTIAN.ORG

SERMON by Rev. Kevin Snow

On our first Sunday in Advent, we learned that Bob's favorite Christmas Story characters were the Shepherds...until the second Sunday, when he revealed to us **the truth**...that his favorite characters were actually the magi...but just as we were convinced that the magi should be our favorite, it only made logical sense to adopt the angels as our favorite characters in the Christmas narrative. By the time we arrived at last Sunday, the pendulum arm had once again swung to the other side, as we landed on two new favorites, Mary and Joseph. If, after last Sunday's service, you said, "No more, I'm with Mary and Joseph to the end, I cannot be swayed!," chances are, like Ricky Bobby, you allowed the baby Jesus to become your favorite...the mysterious stranger in the straw. Today, our focus shifts to a final character in the Christmas story. King Herod. And if I'm supposed to fall in line with the sermon series, I should be prepared to say, without a doubt, that King Herod is my favorite character in the Christmas narrative. I'm not quite there yet...I can see the Peaceable Kingdom on the horizon...maybe today we can get there together.

Why the hesitancy to name Herod my favorite? Who is this King Herod anyway? Herod was the person in high school you took the long route to class in order to avoid. Have you heard someone described as having a "short fuse"? Apparently Herod had no fuse, only a button...instant fury with no time to run. Herod, who came from a long line of soldiers, politicians,

and diplomats, was referred to as Herod the Great, and was appointed King of the Jews by the Roman Senate in 40 B.C.¹ But, unfortunately for Herod - instead of being remembered for his leadership, who in times of difficulty cancelled taxes for his people and melted down his own gold plate to buy food for his people during famine², or his military conquests, which were great, or his massive building programs, such as building the Temple in Jerusalem³ - he's remembered for his maniacal insecurity. Throughout his reign, he was never hesitant to kill anyone, friend or foe, that posed a threat, actual or potential, to his power. At different points in his life, Herod ordered the execution of his Hasmonean wife, her mother, and three of his own sons. Even upon his deathbed, Herod arranged for the slaughter of several notable Jewish leaders.⁴ It's believed that Augustus, the Roman Emperor, had said that it was safer to be Herod's pig than Herod's son.⁵ The text tells us that Herod sought Jesus, not to kill him, but to **destroy** him.

When we know a little about Herod's background, it should come as less of a surprise that he reacted in this way when the wise men brought him news of a new King of the Jews in town. Does this make Herod's act, the killing of Bethlehem's children two years old and younger acceptable? **Not at all.** But we know people in power will do desperate things to keep their power. No wonder it's so difficult to make King Herod our favorite character in the Christmas story, let alone include him at all. Can you remember a time when Herod was included in a

Christmas pageant? Herod sticks out like a sore thumb against the backdrop of the dedicated, loving, and gentle nature of the shepherds, magi, angels, and holy family. Herod is everything on paper that Jesus is not. He is insecure, he is selfish, he shows a blatant disregard for the well being of others, he is seething with anger, and he is hungry for power. In *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*, the terrible Herdmans want to include Herod in their Christmas play...so that someone can beat him up.

However, the more we think about it, the more we might be able to identify with a tiny sliver of King Herod. Can we think, for a moment, about the last time our power or status was challenged? How would we react if someone came to us and said, "This is your two week notice. Someone else will be replacing you at work next month."? What if someone said, "Because you're a man or because you're a woman, I'm not going to listen to you in this situation."? Would we release the grip on our own power, or would we struggle to keep it? What if someone said we're replacing you because you're too young or too old...or because of the color of your skin? In Herod's case, not only does he receive news that he is losing his job, but he is further tricked and deceived by the wise men. We can begin to connect our identity with our job so closely, that we become who we are at work. One of the first things we ask people we meet is, "What do you do?" As if "What do you do?" ultimately defines who we are. So I can imagine, when Herod hears that another King of the Jews is on the way, not just his job, but his identity, who he is as a person, is being threatened as well.

Thankfully, however, the focus of today's text isn't on King Herod. Instead, Matthew interprets the birth of Jesus Christ as a fulfillment of prophecy. Matthew sees Jesus' birth in Bethlehem of Judea as a fulfillment of Micah 5:2, which reads: "But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient of days." Further along in chapter two: When Joseph is warned in a dream to flee to

Egypt and remain until Herod's death, Matthew sees this as fulfilling Hosea 11:1, which reads, "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son." If two instances weren't enough, we're presented with a third. When Herod kills the children of Bethlehem, two years and younger, Matthew sees this as fulfilling Jeremiah 31:15, "Thus says the Lord: A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more." If the third time wasn't a charm for you, if you're on the edge of believing, but just can't quite get there, Matthew presents a fourth fulfillment of prophecy in chapter two: "He will be called a Nazorean." And good luck finding this prophecy in the Old Testament, because it's not there.

I've been reading a book over the past couple of weeks, I'm not finished with it yet, but I would recommend it so far. The book is called, *Love is a Mix Tape*. You remember mix tapes, right? They aren't that far off despite the technological advances in modern music. Even if you're burning CD's or making a new playlist for your iPod, you're still, at the heart of it, making a mix tape. The author notes the different reasons for making mix tapes, and I bet we've all made one of the following: The party mix tape...all of the best songs to dance to, sing along with, and keep the atmosphere lively. The, I have a crush on you mix tape...pouring out our feelings in song, one mushy lyric after another. Sometimes this is followed by the break-up mix tape ... featuring all the "how could you do this to me you're such an insensitive idiot" songs we can find. There's the road trip mix tape, the workout mix tape...we can always find a good reason for a new mix tape.

I think the birth of Jesus Christ is a part of Matthew's theological mix tape. We dub a mix tape to make the world in which we live make sense to us...to help us identify with what we're going through at the time of its hearing. Mix tapes help us make sense of our present realities through song. And for Matthew, the birth of Christ falls right in line with his Old Testament mix tape of Micah, Hosea, and Jeremiah.

Whether or not these prophecies were told and written with Jesus in mind or not is not the point here. When we burn a mix tape, the songs we include weren't meant to be taken from their original album. But we're making something radically new. The point is that Matthew has made these connections with his past and present realities. God has come to live among us, and this is an event not to be taken lightly.

Emmanuel...God with us. Our lives, the world in which we live, the people we interact with, the ways in which we interact with God, they have all been enriched because Jesus Christ was born and lived among us. Our power doesn't lie in fancy titles, or who we are at work, or how many zeros we have in our bank account. Our power lies in the fact that we are children of God, that we are loved by the One that loves completely, that we are each known and called by name. Maybe Jimi Hendrix had it right when he said, "When the power of love overcomes the love of power, then the world will know peace." We no longer have to look continuously over our shoulder, wondering if we're within Herod's reach. We only have to look forward and around us, as we look for and continue to create the Peaceable Kingdom.

When I lived in Kentucky, I was youth minister at a beautiful church full of beautiful people, much like here at Community, called Oxford Christian Church. Several years ago, the youth entered a Christmas float in the local parade. We had the perfect Christmas scene. We had Mary and Joseph, huddled around the Christ child to keep him warm. We had angels with shimmering halos, and shepherds watching over the entire scene. As we passed throughout the parade, I wish you could've seen the joy spread across the children's faces as they shouted, "Merry Christmas!" to all the onlookers. I'll never forget that evening. One shepherd, his name was Jacob, was having an especially joyous time shouting "Merry Christmas!" as our float moved along. Jacob was a younger, smaller guy; this is his green handprint right here on my stole. I loved talking to Jacob because he loved life so much, sometimes when he was telling me about his week, three sentences would come out instead

of one, and he would have to catch his breath before he moved on. On this particular night, however, his message was crystal clear. "Merry Christmas!" he yelled to all the onlookers. But when the parade was over, Jacob didn't cease with his message. "Merry Christmas!" he continued to yell. Even when no one was on the street, "Merry Christmas!" As a dog walked by, "Merry Christmas!" As we circled back to the cars, he yelled Merry Christmas to people who were downtown, but not there for the parade. "The parade is over now," someone finally said to Jacob, "you can stop saying that. These people aren't here for us." "I can't stop," Jacob replied, "there might be someone who hasn't heard 'Merry Christmas' yet."

There are a lot of good reasons to remain within Herod's reach instead of focusing on the Peaceable Kingdom. Moving toward the Peaceable Kingdom will require some work. Actually, it will require a lot of work; and this work will require change in our lives. And we all know how much we dread making changes. But the difference is indescribable. Will you continue to struggle with life's ups and downs within the Peaceable Kingdom? Yes. But you will never do so alone, because God has come to live among us. Will there continue to be death, and pain, and loss within the Peaceable Kingdom? Yes. But our hearts will never endure them apart from God's real and near presence, because Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God. Will there be anger, disappointment, dejection, and hatred within the Peaceable Kingdom? Perhaps. But as the season of Advent has shown, the light of Christ will shine upon them, and they will be surrounded with the lights of peace, hope, joy, and love. In four days, we'll celebrate the beginning of a New Year. What better time to resolve to move beyond Herod's reach, and into the Peaceable Kingdom?

NOTES

- ¹ *Harper Collins Bible Dictionary*, p. 416.
- ² William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 33.
- ³ Barclay, p. 33.
- ⁴ Barclay, p. 42.
- ⁵ Barclay, p. 33.

Pastoral Prayer by Dr. Robert Lee Hill

O Lord of Love, O God of Grace, O Maker of Mystery,

In the presence of Your generosity, our hearts are brimming nearly to the point of breaking. In the glow of the light You shone on the Bethlehem of Jesus' birth (and that You keep shining on our own "Bethlehems" here), we are glad. And being found here, in this place, in this moment by You, we rejoice!

Our joy is full because You have found us, despite our evasions, beyond our attempts to escape Your grace.

Our thanks are unending, because You have found us and have upheld us, when we had lost ourselves and could hardly keep going.

Our humility is overflowing because You have lovingly found us when sometimes we didn't believe love or being loved or being lovable was even possible.

We rejoice because You have found us!

As we continue to peer over into Christ's manger of blessed mercy during this Christmas season, and, more pressingly, in all of our tomorrows, inspire us to be vigilant in finding You.

From this day on, lead us to find You each and every day of our walk in faith.

Lead us to find You in the eyes and hands and unfettered, exuberant joy of children, for we know that unless we become like children we cannot enter into the glory of Your unfailing grace.

Lead us to find You in the simplest, most essential gatherings – around a crust of bread, sharing a cup of water, listening to a story of truth – for we know that it is in such holy gatherings that we meet more than eye or ear or soul can behold.

Lead us to find You in the beauty of the world, for we know that "Beauty will save the world."

Lead us to find You in the communion of souls we encounter in the family of faith, for we know that day by day, the Word of Your gift in Christ is becoming flesh again and again – and again! – in the those seeking to become more like Christ.

Lead us to find You in each and every person who abides on the margins of this earthly journey – on the edge of despair, along the borderland of unbounded pain, at the crossroads of a crisis, in a lair of loneliness, in the horrors of homelessness, on the precipice of poverty – for we know that Mary's baby, Your Son, and our Christ, said we would always be able to find Him at the address of "the least of these my brothers [and sisters]."

You have found us, and we are glad! As we continuously, urgently seek to find You, we rejoice! And in this holy finding, dear God, make Christmas happen for us not merely for a moment or a season but for a lifetime, a lifestyle of such moments!

In Jesus' holy name, AMEN.

Offertory Invitation by Rev. Melissa St. Clair

Lucida lived with her family in a small village in the mountains of Mexico. One day as *la Navidad* – Christmas – approached Father Alvarez came to Lucida's house and asked her mama to weave a new blanket for the Baby Jesus in the Christmas procession. The old one had worn out and Lucida's mother was known as an excellent weaver. Lucida's mama agreed and the mother and daughter began to work on the blanket together – buying the wool, dying the yarn, stringing the loom. A few days before Christmas, Lucida's mother fell ill. Lucida tried to finish the blanket, but as she tried to weave, the yarn got tangled. The more she tried to untangle it, the worse it got. Christmas Eve came and Lucida tried to hide in the shadows as the Christmas procession passed. And old woman saw Lucida and shared an important message with her – her mama would be fine and would be coming home soon. She urged Lucida on to the church. Lucida resisted, explaining that she didn't have a gift for the Baby Jesus – the blanket had gotten tangled up and Christmas had been ruined!

The wise old women responded – "Ah, Lucida, any gift is beautiful because it is given. Whatever you give, the Baby Jesus will love, because it comes from you." Lucida looked around but only saw a patch of tall weeds growing nearby. She grabbed an armful and walked into the church. The candlelight was glowing softly as Lucida placed the weeds at the manger scene. People begin to whisper about the girl bringing weeds into the church. Lucida knelt and prayed. When she opened her eyes, she saw that each weed was tipped with a flaming red star, glistening in the candlelight. This is the legend of the Flower of the Holy Night – the poinsettia. (From *The Legend of the Poinsettia* retold by Tomie dePaola)

Any gift is beautiful because it is given. Whatever you give, Christ will love, because it comes from you. Give generously, knowing that each gift has the potential to be transformed into something beautiful for the sake of God's kingdom on this earth.