

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
“Herod and the Threatening Jesus”
Matthew 2:1-18
January 6, 2019

When you read the gospel story from beginning to end, Jesus seems to always be a threat to national security.

[pause]

Think about it...

Jesus is always a threat to national security.

Of course, that's really evident at the end of his life. He was executed as a political prisoner by the great Roman Empire. We don't always think of the cross that way, I know. But on a concrete level, that's what happened.

He was tried and convicted by a governor of Rome.

His crime: claiming to be a king.

His sentence: the same sentence that Rome always gave to political uprisings – death by crucifixion.

In Jesus' time, the cross was a powerful symbol that meant one thing in particular: “Don't mess with Rome.”

The cross was how Rome maintained its peace and prosperity. Jesus wasn't the first, or the last to be executed that way. As far as Rome was concerned, he was another up-start leader... who became a threat to their way of life... and was dealt with accordingly.

But Jesus' threat to national security certainly didn't begin with Pilate. It began with Herod the Great... or... we might say, “Herod the Not-So-Great” that we just heard about in Matthew 2.

To be clear, this isn't the same Herod who was around at Jesus' crucifixion, or that beheaded John the Baptist. That was Herod Antipas, Herod the Great's son. But you know, as they say, the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. Herod Antipas... was just a reflection of the power-lust of his daddy, Herod the Great.

This Herod spent his life consolidating power... and was pretty ruthless doing it. But apparently, he felt rather threatened by news of a baby born in Bethlehem.

On occasion, Christians have had a tendency to neuter Jesus... to make him into a nice guy who just wants us all to be nice... and to get along.

But if you read the Bible, then that's not quite right. Yes, Jesus embodied Divine love, and the love of God is full of grace and compassion, but that's not all. The Love of God is also refining fire... and that can be pretty threatening... especially to the status quo.

Jesus, by his very presence, was a threat...

in part, because Jesus is always a threat... to national security.

So, as we bring our series on the characters of Christmas to a close, I thought it might be worth spending a bit of time with Herod the Not-So-Great...

to help us remember that from the very beginning... the story of Jesus is more than simply beautiful stars and endearing mangers.

The story of Jesus is one that will always threaten our comfortable ways of living, and our standard goals of success, wealth, and security.

So, let me tell you the story of Herod.¹

He was born about 65 to 70 years before Jesus. His daddy, Antipater, recognized that the only way to get ahead in life was to gain the favor and backing of Rome. So, after supporting various Roman leaders along the way, Rome finally made his daddy a genuine Roman citizen, with all the rights and privileges thereof. They also made his daddy the Procurator of Judea.

So, by the time Herod turned 25, his daddy made him the governor of the northern half of Judea known as Galilee. He made his brother the governor of Jerusalem in the south. It was awful nice of good old dad, but it didn't quite suit Herod's ambitions. He wanted more... but that's later.

After Antipater was poisoned, Herod and his brother got a promotion. Emperor Antony promoted them to tetrarchs over Judea and Galilee... even though there were three factions of Jewish people who went to Antony to complain about these brothers... and their rule.

Antony didn't care though. Because in Herod and his brother, the Emperor of Rome saw two locals that would watch after Roman interests in the region.

As time goes by, all kinds of political and military maneuvering happen in the region. Herod, the wanna-be-great, is a keen player in all this. He makes allies, forges alliances... and always... always... keeps a close relationship with the Emperor of Rome... whoever that happens to be.

So, that eventually, with the support of Octavius (the future Caesar Augustus), Herod is able to take over Jerusalem and become the sole local ***"King of the Jews."*** You see, that title was one he worked hard to gain.

Now, a new king needs to solidify their power, right? ... Even if he has the backing of Rome. Herod knew this. So, he started by executing 45 of Jerusalem's wealthiest citizens who had supported his rival. A good way to make an impression, you know.

A new king also needs to garner the support of the religious establishment. It's an ancient pattern that still applies today.

In any society, the priests or the religious establishment (whatever that religion is) are needed to give divine legitimacy to whoever the ruler or government is.

In return, the ruling government gives political power and security to the religious establishment and its priests.

It's a quid-pro-quo kind of relationship.

The pattern's the same in just about every culture and time throughout history... even ours.

¹ The following information is taken from Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, ed., *New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible D-H Volume 2* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007), 802–7.

The religious establishment gives divine legitimacy to the ruling government, and in return, the government gives political power and security to the religious establishment.

(Just as a side note, I find that to be an incredibly troubling pattern, and it is one of the main reasons I'm a Baptist. Traditionally, Baptists were the ones that tried to break that pattern... although you certainly couldn't tell it by many of our Baptist brothers and sisters today.

But Baptists were the ones who invented and fought for a separation between church and state – a separation that is primarily about the church not being in the pocket of the state or the state receiving its legitimacy from the church... but that's another sermon. Back to Herod.)

Herod needed divine legitimacy. Which, in his day, meant he needed a high priest. So, he appoints one of his in-laws. But that high priest became too popular for Herod's comfort.

And you know how ego driven rulers are, right? They can't stand not being in the limelight. So, Herod had that high priest drowned in a pool... It's kind of the ancient way of firing a cabinet member.

Well, eventually Herod solidifies his power and begins great building projects across the region. He even cuts taxes a few times to try to promote his popularity. And in the process, he tries to set himself up as the greatest King of Judea and Jerusalem.

So, if Solomon's ancient temple was spectacular, Herod figured a temple **twice that size** would be even better, right?

So, that's what Herod sets out to do. He doubles the temple mound and expands the temple in Jerusalem to its greatest glory... in history.

Only remember, Herod... can pretend he cares about the God of Abraham and Moses all he wants... He can pretend to be a good King of the Jews... but if you're paying attention, you knew, the one he is really serving is not Yahweh, but himself.

And serving his own self-interest
means he has to keep serving Rome's interest.

So, right over the great temple gate, Herod erected a massive golden eagle. The eagle, you see, was the national symbol of Rome. (Kind of ironic for us, isn't it?) Anyway, the eagle was a powerful and clear symbol to anyone coming in or out of the temple. It was a symbol that said— *"Sure, we may worship the God of the Jews, but we're only here under the blessing and protection of Rome. So, don't bite the hand that feeds you."*

It's the same pattern again, isn't it?
Put the national symbol at the place you worship,
and you **get** and **give**.

You **get** political protection.

You **give** religious legitimacy to the government...

It doesn't really matter what that government does, does it? The government could get away with murder, but the eagle over the temple gate stands.

(By the way... this is why putting a flag up at church is spiritually dangerous business... but again, that's another sermon.)

Well, as Herod got older, he became increasingly paranoid about losing his grip on his kingdom. His problems grew when he needed to set up a successor. You see, Herod the wanna-be-great was married 10 times... and had 15 children... and at least 20 grandchildren.

You can imagine... those children fought over who would be the heir... And you know how it is when your children fight all the time, right? It can make you a bit crazy.

That must have been what happened to Herod... because he went out and slaughtered a few of those wives and sons to clear things up.

"After all," he thought, "they might have been plotting against me."

Then, near the end of his life, news started to spread that he had died. It was a bit too hopeful... You see, it hadn't quite happened yet. But at the news, a Pharisee encouraged a number of young men to go rip down that golden eagle from the temple.

That eagle was a disgrace to them... and taunted them every time they went to worship. So, these men came like a mob and ripped that thing down...

Unfortunately, Herod wasn't quite dead.

Not yet, anyway...

So, he had the whole lot of them burned alive.

At his funeral, he wanted quite a show. So, he was to be paraded from Jericho to his final resting place. And just to make sure that there was enough crying on his behalf... he gave the order that when he died, the leading citizens of Jericho should be slaughtered.

"One way or another, the whole city will be crying at my funeral," he thought.

Now, it was in this late season of Herod's life... about two years before he died that a group of foreign wise men show up and ask him, "Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews? We saw his star shining."

It's almost comical when you know a bit about Herod, isn't it?

Of course, he was paranoid... as Matthew says.

And all of Jerusalem was terrified with him... because... most of the elites of Jerusalem were in bed with Herod and dependent on the current regime for their own power, and wealth, and security.

This wasn't good news...

not for Herod, and not for his political and religious allies.

And so... Herod makes a plan... a plan for the little ones in Bethlehem.

Because, you see, ***Jesus was a threat to national security.***

Jesus... was a threat... to the stability of the political and economic system ruling the day.

From the day he is born, Jesus upset the status quo.

It's unbelievable, really.

That's just what happens when God shows up into our world.

All the schemes to keep our power and security in place get threatened... because God's Kingdom operates under a whole different set of assumptions than the kingdoms of our world.

God's ways are very different than the ways of countries and kingdoms. This seems to be the message of Jesus again and again.

"The first, shall be last," Jesus says.

"If one sheep is missing, the shepherd is perfectly fine leaving the 99 vulnerable while he goes and looks for the one lost sheep."

"The prostitutes and the tax collectors are entering the Kingdom of God before the religious and community leaders..." Jesus teaches.

"If you try to save your life, you'll lose it. But if you lose your life for the sake of the gospel, you'll save it."

And he just keeps going...
again, and again turning the ways of kingdoms and countries on their heads...
the ways of power and security upside down...

and says that God's Kingdom doesn't work like all these kingdoms...

So, if you want to participate in God's Kingdom... then you're going to have to repent... that is, change the normal way of doing business... and do some things that just don't make sense...

Things like:

"Love your enemy and pray for those that persecute you.

Because... Blessed are the peacemakers,

And Blessed are the meek,

And Blessed are those that turn the other cheek...

and those that do not judge...

and those that welcome the prisoner, and the sick, and the poor, and—the—*for-eig-ner*...

because when you welcome the least of these... you are welcoming me." Jesus says.

When you start to really listen to Jesus' message, it is unnerving... and not just for the Herods of our world, but for us all. Because Jesus' way is a threat... to our own sensibilities of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Not only that, but Jesus asks us to clarify our allegiances. "**You cannot serve two masters,**" he says.

So, we have to decide... and we have to be real clear about it.

We have to decide where our first allegiance lies:

with God's Kingdom...

or our country's kingdom.

Which is first for us?

And so, you see... it doesn't matter what time or country you live in,
what government you're under,
or in our context, who is in the White House.

Jesus still asks us the same question. Whose kingdom will have our primary allegiance?
Which means: **Jesus... will always be... a threat... to national security.**

I think that is what C. S. Lewis was getting at
in his famous story The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe... when the children were first learning
about Aslan... and they find out he's a lion... and not just any lion, but the Great Lion!

"Ooh" said Susan. "I'd thought he was a man... [Is he safe?]" she asked Mr. Beaver... who looks at her
like she's crazy.

"Safe?" he asked her ... "Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's
the King, I tell you."

Lewis was saying something important about God's presence in our lives.
Jesus isn't safe.

Herod knew it the first time he heard about him... And so, Herod did... what any *sensible* person
under threat would do: *he tried to get rid of him*.

And in the process, Herod turned Jesus, and Mary, and Joseph into refugees...
They packed up their things... anything they could carry... and started walking... and walking... the
way refugees do.

There's no plane ticket or car ride, for Mary, Joseph, and Jesus.
No safe passage, or proper papers. Nope, they just started walking... for weeks they walked...
from town to town... down dusty roads... hoping to make it to Egypt to start a new life.

And who knows who all they met along the way...
Maybe they were in a caravan of people fleeing Bethlehem and Herod's rule...
All I know is that they got to Egypt not knowing a soul...
and thank God ***someone welcomed them in***.

To be honest with you... I'm not so sure we would have.
Welcoming in Jesus like that...?
Brown skinned refugee from another country who doesn't even speak our language?
Well, white men like myself don't have a very good track record with that sort of thing.

All that makes me wonder...
how many times have I felt threatened by the way that God wanted to come to me...
by the way that God was showing up in the midst of my plans...
and I felt so threatened by it... that I subtly tried to get rid of the holy prompting and in the
process... turned Jesus... into a refugee.

You and I, we may not be Herod-the-wanna-be-Great, but I can guarantee that there have been
moments for us all... when Jesus threatened our way of life... And so, rather than going to worship at the
manger, we sent soldiers to get rid of him.

His way was just... well, it just wasn't safe.

But what might happen... if we learned to trust that even if his ways aren't safe... *it is good*, because he's the ultimate king?

What might happen... if we believed that all the risk of following Jesus was worth it... because it was the way of goodness, and joy, and purpose, and love ever-lasting?

What might happen if... rather than running him off every time we feel threatened... we began to welcome him in?

If we welcomed him... right into the stuff of our life?

Well... **we may just find that God's Kingdom has come...**

on earth... and into our lives...as it is in heaven.

We may just find that "God imparts" to us... "the blessings of his heaven."

Or to put it another way,
if we trust that Jesus is good, even if his way is a threat... if we can trust him enough to have "meek souls [that] will receive him still..."

we may just discover that his way of life takes us to some place amazing...

not just after we're gone, but even right here right now...

some place... beyond our wildest dreams.

This is our hope, in Christ.

Amen.

"Those who ignore the divine teachings do so at their own peril -- not because God is standing over them with a hammer, but because the teachings describe the way of life."

~Barbara Brown Taylor

Hymn of Preparation, 155. O Little Town of Bethlehem, vs. 3-4