

Green Hill Presbyterian Church
“Keeping Herod in Christmas”
Thomas G. Speers, III
Christmas 1--December 29, 2019

Lessons: Isaiah 63:7-9; Matthew 2:13-23

Many of us have heard the often-repeated call that we need to keep Christ in Christmas. This is a reasonable call that few people could disagree with, although, I will say that those who worry that Christmas has become too secular, also need to remember that Jesus was born in an utterly secular setting. He wasn't born in the temple; he was born out in the world, and that is one of the places we continue to find him today. As one translation puts it: “The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood.”¹ So yes, keep the Christ in Christmas, but also remember that Jesus came in the most secular of ways.

Many of us have heard the call to keep the Christ in Christmas, but I suspect that few have heard the call that is the title of my sermon today: Keep the Herod in Christmas. Some of you maybe didn't even know that Herod was actually a part of Christmas in the first place. Some astute readers will remember that the wise men went first to Herod to ask where the child was to be born, and Herod seemed to show some interest in this child, asking the Magi to return and report on all that they discovered in Bethlehem. But they were warned in a dream to return home another way. So, in our lesson today, Herod is no longer simply frightened, now he is also angry and he orders that all the male children under two years of age should be slaughtered. It is a perfectly terrible story and it is the passage chosen for this first Sunday after Christmas. We've been singing beautiful Christmas carols. What are we doing encountering a passage like this? I want to suggest that Herod actually belongs in our Christmas celebrations, because Christmas is not only about *sugar and spice and everything nice*, it is also about our need for a savior; it is also about the reality of evil and suffering in our world. Matthew doesn't sanitize the Christmas story; why should we?

Kerry Bond, a Baptist pastor from Tennessee tells of his experience visiting in Bethlehem during a sabbatical. Any of you who have visited there know the sense of awe that surrounds you. Bond tells of listening to a group of nuns singing Silent Night, as a mother gently laid her own baby in the niche where tradition says Jesus was born. Even if that wasn't exactly the place where Jesus was born, the devotion of pilgrims across the centuries gave it a sacred aura. But then Bond left the church and he noticed a look of panic in the eyes of the street vendors outside. “A white puff of smoke arose over some nearby buildings. Several dozen men, women and children ran from the smoke towards the church. Soon my eyes and the eyes of those around me began to water uncontrollably. My throat tightened. Tear gas! Meant to quell a disturbance in a narrow street, the gas was carried over the church by a gentle westerly wind...I never expected something like this to happen.

“But why shouldn't I? This is the city where Herod sent his hit-men to find and kill the infant Jesus. This is the town where the mothers of murdered children cried the lamentation of Rachel. Bethlehem is not only the place of the divine mystery of the incarnation, but also the place of human brutality. Christmas awes us with the miracle of the birth of Jesus and we often forget the cruelty displayed there, too. If Jesus incarnates God, Herod incarnates evil.” Bond goes on to suggest that leaving Herod in the Christmas narrative allows us to address the shadow of evil hovering over Christmas to this day. “Herod still stalks the earth. He may be disguised in the military fatigues of a dictator. He murders street children in Brazil by sending death squads when darkness falls. Herod sells Thai children as prostitutes to wealthy westerners. He detonates a car bomb that kills innocent people.”²

Herod is altogether too much with us in the world today. That is part of the reason it is so important to keep him in the Christmas story. Herod tried to kill the promise. He tried to put an end to God's plan,

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message, The Bible in Contemporary Language*. NAV Press. © 2002.

² Kerry Bond, *The Reality of Herod*, in *The Living Pulpit*, October – December 1995 © 1995.

but he could not do it. He hurt a lot of people trying to thwart God's plan, but God's plan was not thwarted. Of course, there is much that is not answered in this story. If God could warn Joseph and send him off with Mary and the baby into Egypt, then why couldn't God also protect the other children from Herod? We don't know the answer to that, any more than we know the answer to questions of why any children or any adults suffer. We don't know why. But this story today proclaims that even the worst of human brutality is not strong enough to deter God's saving action. That is something we all need to remember. For the message of Emmanuel, of God with us, is not just for pageants and candle-lit services. It is also for life at its worst. There too God is with us. God is with us when the innocents are slaughtered. God is with us when dreams are shattered. God is with us when hearts are broken. God is with us when Herod continues to stalk the earth. God is with us and no matter how much Herod may try to prevent God's saving action, he can't do it.

And this is something that has been true for longer than the life of Christianity. In Isaiah, when the prophet speaks of God's love, he calls it steadfast, something that is present and active all the time, something that held the people of Israel in all circumstances. So, when Israel was afflicted, God was also afflicted, and actively at work to redeem and save. God was the one who lifted them up. Others might have tried to put them down, others might even have succeeded for a time, but God cannot be put down forever. God is with us.

Keep the Herod in Christmas so that when evil comes our way our faith will be ready to grapple with it. We'll be able to proclaim that evil is something we know all about; we aren't surprised by its presence; it has been defeated by God, even though it continues to work its horror in the world. Keep the Herod in Christmas so that those who don't have what might be called a picture-perfect holiday situation, those who are broken in spirit or circumstance might know that the promises of Christmas are very especially for them. When the world isn't right, we are tempted not to celebrate. That's what the Grinch expected when he stole all the toys from *Whoville*, but the *Whos* all sang anyway because Christmas is more than presents and perfect families and health and wholeness. When Herod appears, we are tempted not to celebrate, but that is precisely when we should celebrate.

Ann Weems says it this way: "Not celebrate? Your burden is too great to bear? Your loneliness is intensified during the Christmas season? Your tears seem to have no end? Not celebrate? You should lead the procession! You should run through the streets to ring the bells and sing the loudest! You should fling tinsel on the tree, and open your house to your neighbors, and call them in to dance! For it is you above all others who know the joy of Advent. It is unto you that a Savior is born this day, One who comes to lift your burden from your shoulders, One who comes to wipe the tears from your eyes. You are not alone, for he is born this day to you."³

Evil is still around. That is the part of Herod. But Herod couldn't even stop a tiny little baby. Keep the Herod in Christmas as a way to remember that God is at work especially in the most difficult times we encounter.

Let us pray: Gracious God, sometimes the power of evil seems capable of doing us in; remind us that you have overcome all the powers of evil, that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not and will not overcome it. We pray in the name of the Child of Bethlehem, even Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.

³ Ann Weems, Not Celebrate, in *Kneeling in Bethlehem*. Westminster John Knox Press. © 1993