

## REIGN OF EVIL

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Matthew 2:13-23

As always, we had a wonderful Christmas Eve worship service this year. So many of you pulled together to make the service possible—the planners, the musicians, the decorators, the participants. On Christmas Eve, this room was full up to the balcony with church members, family members, guests, and lots of people I didn't recognize. These were folk who I assume just walked in off the street for the opportunity to worship on Christmas Eve.

The structure of our service is known as 'lessons and carols'—readings from scripture accompanied by a musical selections. The readings vary from year to year, but generally they include the creation and fall, the prophesy of salvation, the manifestation of that promise in the birth, and the announcement and glorification of God being with us to shepherd us toward salvation. The birth story may include the shepherds and the angels and often the visit of the wise ones from the east—how they followed that star looking for the new king to be born. They first go to the capitol—Jerusalem, the obvious place to seek a new king—but discover that he isn't there. The local priests inform them that the ancient prophecy declared that the type of king they are looking for would be born in Bethlehem—a small village just a few miles away. King Herod sends the wise ones to Bethlehem with instructions to return to him with any news of this king.

They travel to Bethlehem and they locate the child. They present him with the extravagant gifts they carried with them. Then, because they are wise, they know not to fall for Herod's trap and they head for home by an alternate road.

If we read about the wise ones on Christmas Eve, we always conclude the reading with their departure by another road. We don't continue any further because it is a too horrific a story. On Christmas Eve, we are only few hours from tucking the little ones into bed as visions of sugarplums dance in their heads. It not really the time to introduce this nightmare—the insane idea that a king would send his soldiers into a small village and pull every male child from the arms of their mothers and kill them. Talk about a war on Christmas.

King Herod, at this point, had reigned as king for 41 years. We call him king but that is in title only. He had inherited the role from his father who had been appointed by the Romans. The Herods were not Jews. Herod wasn't a legitimate king, he was just a puppet of the Romans. It was his job to subdue any rebellions among the Jews. He seemed to enjoy his job.

During the course of his reign, Herod had at least 9 wives and 14 children. I say “at least” because there were probably more children. Daughter’s births weren’t always recorded.

Herod wasn’t the best family man. He placed one of his wives—Mariamne (I)—on trial for adultery. As chief witness against Mariamne was her own mother—testifying because she feared for her own life. Herod had his wife executed, which led her mother to declare herself queen, arguing that Herod was mentally unfit to rule (which appears to be true). Herod had her executed as well.

Herod had two young sons from his marriage to Mariamne and he viewed them as threats to his power. He sought to put them on trial for treason, but Emperor Augustus stepped in and ordered the three instead to reconcile. Some years later, Emperor Augustus was attempting to revive the Olympic Games. Herod sent a huge financial donation toward the cause, and in return, the emperor allowed Herod to execute his two sons. Augustus was famously heard to say, “I would rather be Herod’s dog than Herod’s son.”

Herod then anointed his eldest son, Antipater—who had a different mother—to be the exclusive heir to the throne. But in time, Herod grew jealous of him and put him on trial for treason and had him executed as well. This time, the emperor declared that no more of Herod’s sons could ever be king. It was the only way he could stop the chaos and killing. Eventually, Herod died and three of his sons became rulers each governing one-third of their father’s realm. They were called the tetrachs because there were three of them. Herod Antipas—one of the three—would, 33 years later, witness the child who had been born in Bethlehem standing before him in chains, wearing a crown of thorns.

When Herod catches wind that the wise ones from the east were seeking the new born king of the Jews he became exceedingly worried. The last thing he needed was there to appear a legitimate king of Judea. He sends soldiers to eliminate this potential challenge to his rule.

You shouldn’t be surprised that a man who would willingly execute his own children would all call for the murder of other people’s children.

Jesus, of course, escaped this fate. An angel came to Joseph in a dream, and warns him to take his family and flee to Egypt—that Herod was on the warpath. And Joseph obeys. Under cover of darkness, the family loads up and travels to Egypt.

Joseph’s actions should be noted here. We often kid about Joseph not having much of a part in the Jesus story, but here, clearly, he is the protector.

We don’t know where in Egypt the holy family resided, but we do know that in the great city of Alexandria there was a thriving Jewish quarter. It is possible,

scholars have reasoned, that Jesus' early years were spent in that place learning from the distinguished rabbis of that city.

Many years ago, the church I was serving hosted a pastor from Egypt for several weeks. A really nice man. He said that Americans would often ask him how long there had been a Christian church in Egypt. He would point out that the church had been there ever since the Holy Family fled Bethlehem. He always laughed about that.

Joseph and his family stayed in Egypt until he was again visited by an angel. This angel instructed him to take his family home, that Herod was dead. And so they returned. But Judea didn't seem safe given that Herod's son Archelaus was the ruler of that region. Joseph was directed in another dream to relocate in Galilee. And they made their home in Nazareth.

That is the story that we looking at today—the story of how King Herod ordered the massacre of the children in and around Bethlehem simply because he was insecure in his power. King Herod plays an important role not just in the Christmas story but in the story of Israel and Judea as well. Not a good man, he was however an influential leader.

This story of slaughtering all the children in a village is one we avoid at Christmas Eve, you won't see it in any Christmas pageant, and I doubt we'll ever explore the subject in Vacation Bible School.

But the story of Herod is not one to ignore. It is a reminder that evil is present in this world. In our faith, we often talk about *the forgiveness of our sins*, and yes, that is important. God came to us so that we might find relief from the burden of our sins. All of us here are basically good people. Yes, we confess that we are fallen, that we are sinners. Yes, there are times when we turn away from God, but I don't see any of you as being classified as "evil." However, Herod is a reminder that evil is present in this world.

Today is the beginning of a new year. Looking back over 2016, we see that was far from perfect. There were too many instances of evil showing its ugly face.

- 49 people killed and more than 50 injured at a nightclub shooting in Orlando.
- In Dallas, 5 police officers are killed and 9 other people wounded in a ambush shooting during a peaceful protest.
- A bomber set bombs at the sight of a charity fun run. Fortunately, no one was hurt. Other bombs were found as well.
- A man in Minnesota stabs 10 people at a mall.

- In South Carolina, a 14 year old opens fire on a playground killing a child and wounding a child and a teacher.
- In Belgium, more than 30 people are killed at the Brussels airport.
- In Pakistan, on Easter Sunday, a suicide bomber kills 69 people and injures more than 340 others in a park.
- In Bangladesh, gunmen kill 20 hostages and two police officers in a cafe.
- In Nice, France, a man plows a truck through a crowd watching fireworks on Bastille Day killing 85 and injuring 200.
- In Cairo, a bomb killed 25 in a church.
- In Berlin, a man ran a truck through a Christmas market killing 12. Despite the evil God is with us.

These are only a sampling of the evil that took place this past year in this world. There was much more, most of which we will never hear about.

Also, in 2016, we lost the voice of someone who witnessed more evil than most of us could bear. Elie Wiesel died in July. Elie Wiesel was a Romanian-born Jew and a survivor of the holocaust. His mother and sister died at Auschwitz and his father died at Buchenwald just shortly before it was liberated. Wiesel himself managed to survive both prisons. He became a powerful voice writing over 57 books about his experience—the most well known book is **Night**. Mr. Wiesel was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. I had the privilege of hearing Mr. Wiesel speak many years ago.

Mr. Wiesel writes about evil. He knows the subject well. In one of his most well-known quotes he writes: “The opposite of love is not hate, but indifference. Indifference creates evil. Hatred is evil itself. Indifference is what allows evil to be strong, what gives it power.”

There is much hatred in this world. And there is much that is evil. And we should not stand by be indifferent and allow the evil to continue. We can be angry. We can be angry as long as it pushes us on toward action to fight that which is evil in this world. We cannot stand by. We cannot do nothing. We can be angry about shootings, about violence, about domestic violence, about economic violence. We can be angry about bombings, about war. We can be angry those who have no homes, who have no hope. We can do all of this because as we know from the story God is with us. The angels protected Joseph and the family. God works through the angels and the visions and the words of scripture. We learn the Christmas story that terrible things happen. But the promise is that God is with us. We can be angry and know that God is standing with us. We can push back against the evil in this world.

Herod in the story plays an important part. Even in the face of the glory of God coming to this earth there is still evil.

Over the past month, I have turned to a particular quote from scripture from the book of Isaiah. You have heard me use it several times because it becomes more appropriate the further we go. From the 9<sup>th</sup> chapter of the prophesy of Isaiah we read: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined.” (Isaiah 9:2)

The evil brings darkness to our world. We are all hurt when something terrible happens. But we also know there is hope, that there is light. For those in the land of darkness, on them light has shined. May we not only see the light ourselves, but may we carry this light to those who suffer. Amen.