

December 29, 2019 **“Herod’s Story” - Monologue presented by Stephanie Siemens**

Matthew 2:1-12

[*sing or intone while putting on a Christmas pageant crown*] “Herod the King in his raging...all children young to slay” (Coventry Carol). Herod the paranoid, Herod the vengeful, Herod the wicked—yes, this is the image of King Herod that most of us have. I am bothered by this because the story has rarely been told from my perspective: King Herod. I have heard the Christmas story recounted from the perspective of shepherds, magi, and even animals. I have no problems with that. It is outrageous, however, that more airtime has been given to a donkey than to me—and a donkey by another name is just that. Meanwhile, the duly appointed “King of the Jews” (that is me) has not been granted interviews. It was the casual misuse of my title by some wandering astrologers that aroused my paranoia that season long ago.

Three wise guys showed up on my doorstep in Jerusalem asking about the birth of child who was “king of the Jews”. Initially I was amused by the audacity of these ill informed star gazers. I invited them in to have a word. “You have got to be joking? I’m King of the Jews and you better not forget it, boys. My credentials are framed on the wall right over here with the originals in Rome.” I was calm on the outside, but on the inside was seething and concerned. I suspected the Rabbi’s were looking for a purer Jewish king. I felt obligated to justify my lineage to these wandering watchers. I told them about my family’s conversion to Judaism a generation or two earlier; my adept (although brutal Mark Anthony said) commanding of the Galilean region; my promotion to King of Jews by the Roman Senate; my second wife from the “purer” [*in a mocking voice*] Hasmonian line. Some of the Rabbi’s had a fit about two wives, but I pointed out that Jacob had two wives, Abraham had more than two wives, and Solomon had hundreds of wives. When they continued to fuss, I had them killed. [*singing*] “Herod the King in his raging...all rabbis old to slay”. I address my pedigree because the Christian story makes great effort to demonstrate that Jesus is a more legitimate king than me.

Those claims play upon the Rabbinical arguments. [*in a whiney voice*] He’s from King David’s lineage; he was born in Bethlehem. With Solomon’s fondness for wives there must be hundreds who come from that family tree. Oh, they cite the Prophet Micah that a ruler will come from that back water village of Bethlehem. Bethlehem, for crying out loud! I don’t care what the prophets or Torah say on the matter, it is sheer nonsense that a king could come from that region. And then there is this business of a star. Just because a star appeared at the birth of Jesus he is supposed to be special? So it happened for a few emperors (Cesar Augustus and Pharaoh for example), but a little twinkle twinkle in the sky doesn’t make him king of the Jews. In fact, all this rubbish about signs and pedigree detract from the weightier issues of governance.

Let me tell you what makes a king. A king in this region must be a decisive commander in chief willing to make hard decisions. Pre-emptive strikes and collateral damage are simply part of the game. In these situations the King suffers as much as anyone, but someone has to make brutal choices to maintain the peace. Let me give you some examples. It was the case that some of my children begin to threaten “regime change”. You want the entire Holy Land enmeshed in a civil war with competing tribes upholding

their particular king for the coronation? I may not be the most compassionate leader history has seen, but the potential chaos of those brats fighting over the throne would have been a very bloody mess. No, for the sake of fellow Jews and countrymen I did what had to be done and put those punks to death. And then there is the Bethlehem incident chronicled in Matthew's gospel. It is this kind of propaganda which is unacceptable. When people talk about a rival King of the Jews, it is time to be afraid. Seditious of this nature can go viral or nuclear; it is like a weapon of mass destruction; it needed to be addressed. If Rome would have gotten wind of rival claims to the throne they would have sailed the fifth fleet into Joppa and marched the fourth legion into Jerusalem. Rape, pillage and plunder would have ensued. So we sent in the special forces to quell the revolution. You think it is an easy choice to put infants to the sword? In frightening times a true King will think of his people and do the dirty work. Sometimes that will involve rage.

I have heard a few things of this King Jesus of Nazareth and his counsel regarding the tough decisions of kingship. [*In the mocking voice*] "Do not resist an evil doer", he says. "Turn the other [check]", he says. "Put your sword away", he says. This guy has no clue how peace and order come to be in our world. He actually lays down his life for those who follow him. He calls them the sheep of his pasture and he calls himself the good shepherd. Let me simply suggest that neither sheep nor shepherds have the might necessary to bring world peace. The most a sheep can do to an invading army is bleed on them. The most a shepherd can do is lay down his life and get in the way. Do you really believe this strategy of war and defense makes sense? Do you really want to follow a king who will lead you to certain death at the hands of barbarians, unbelievers, Romans and the like? This is a serious question for you and all humanity: is this the king you wish to follow into battle? I fear for myself and the nation who follows such a king. This Jesus wishes to protect his people, but I am deeply suspicious of what it would cost us to follow him en masse. It is a choice of which king you will follow. It is truly scary to consider the consequences of following a king like this Jesus, and I will not allow it to happen on my watch.

Being king isn't only about conflicts. Let me tell you about the civil side of leadership, or shall I say the civil engineering side of leadership. A king needs to consider the public works which will make for a better community and reflect the stability of a Province. Public projects create jobs. They build national identity. They create pride. So not everyone got paid a livable wage or in some cases even paid. Well, those things happen with cost overruns. My most famous and ambitious project was the expansion of the Second Temple in Jerusalem. I rebuilt the Temple on a more magnificent scale than the piece of crap Ezra and Nehemiah erected several centuries earlier. In a nod to Jewish religious law, I employed 1,000 priests as masons and carpenters in the rebuilding. Some of my other achievements include the development of water supplies for Jerusalem, building fortresses such as Masada and the Herodium, and founding new cities such as Caesarea Maritima, and enclosing the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron. And lest you think I was only into construction I co-owned a monopoly over the extraction of asphalt from the Dead Sea, which was used in shipbuilding. A good king improves his jurisdiction.

The question comes back to the other King of the Jews. I ask you, what has Jesus constructed or extracted for the betterment of society and his people? It was written that Jesus predicted the end to my temple and suggested that he would become the new tabernacle in which the faithful would worship the Lord. How dare he criticize the temple, and more specifically my temple! How dare he! First, despite what Jesus said my temple is still around and still grand. Second, justice and righteousness are nice concepts, but do they keep one dry? Do they produce national pride? And then we must consider how the building has fared through the centuries—some would say the church of the centuries is more concerned about self-perpetuation than justice or righteousness. What do you say? And how about other projects that Jesus instituted. Does his living water compare favorably to the stuff I aqueducted in from mountain springs? Does his bread sustain like the denarius I pay? Does his good fruit export as easily as my asphalt? The contributions of Jesus to civil society seem more spiritualized than earthy. It makes me truly angry that people would follow this King of the Jews who seems to do little, if anything, for society. Mad enough, in fact, it may be time to sharpen the swords.

The writers of your sacred texts went to great lengths to contrast Jesus with me, the real King of the Jews. It is serious business to follow a king and Lord other than the Emperor or me. The peace of the empire is at stake when pretenders to the throne arise. This is scary stuff. The empire requires complete allegiance and support in executing policy to maintain status quo and the peace that comes with it. I dare say to proclaim a rival king will lead not to joy but to sorrow. You have two clearly different styles of kingship before you. Choose your king carefully. Herod is watching. Herod is concerned. Herod will remember. “Herod the King in his raging...disloyal subjects will slay”. [*Remove crown and return to seat and pastoral character*]

(written by Patrick Preheim, co-pastor Nutana Park Mennonite Church)