

Scared of Christmas

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

2nd in the four-part Advent Series

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Matthew 2:1-8, 13-18 (Common English Bible)

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in the territory of Judea during the rule of King Herod, magi came from the east to Jerusalem. ²They asked, “Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We’ve seen his star in the east, and we’ve come to honor him.”

³When King Herod heard this, he was troubled, and everyone in Jerusalem was troubled with him. ⁴He gathered all the chief priests and the legal experts and asked them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵They said, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for this is what the prophet wrote:

⁶You, Bethlehem, land of Judah,
by no means are you least
among the rulers of Judah,
because from you will come
one who governs,
who will shepherd my people Israel.”

⁷Then Herod secretly called for the magi and found out from them the time when the star had first appeared. ⁸He sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search carefully for the child. When you’ve found him, report to me so that I too may go and honor him.”

¹³When the magi had departed, an angel from the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up. Take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod will soon search for the child in order to kill him.” ¹⁴Joseph got up and, during the night, took the child and his mother to Egypt. ¹⁵He stayed there until Herod died. This fulfilled what the Lord had spoken through the prophet: I have called my son out of Egypt.

¹⁶When Herod knew the magi had fooled him, he grew very angry. He sent soldiers to kill all the children in Bethlehem and in all the surrounding territory who were two years old and younger, according to the time that he had learned from the magi. ¹⁷This fulfilled the word spoken through Jeremiah the prophet:

¹⁸A voice was heard in Ramah,
weeping and much grieving.
Rachel weeping for her children,
and she did not want to be comforted,
because they were no more.

Scared of Christmas? Threatened by a baby in a manger?

Last week, we looked at the coming of the Christ-child from the vantage point of Jesus’ own cousin, John, who would become known as the Baptizer. For John, the birth of his cousin provided shape, focus, and purpose to John’s life, even as he was swept to his death at the hands of tyranny. This week, we will try to look at the baby born in Bethlehem through the eyes of that tyranny, i.e., from the vantage point of self-appointed masters.

The Herods

The Herod family plays a prominent role in the New Testament. Herod the Great tries to murder Jesus when he is an infant and one of his sons participates in Jesus’ crucifixion more than thirty years later. However, the New Testament Herods can be confusing because there are two of them by name and a third called Philip. (see Luke 3:1)

The Herod at the time of Jesus’ birth (about 6BC) was Herod the Great, the founder of the family dynasty. In the struggle for control of Judea nearly forty years before Jesus’

birth, Herod had backed the right horse – the Romans, who had first been invited into Judea more than twenty years earlier. As a reward for his support, the Romans gave Herod the title of King, even though Rome’s power was usually wielded through a governor (e.g. Pilate, decades later). It is important to remember that though Herod possessed a royal title, he had a master who was often harsh and demanding – Caesar, Emperor of Rome and its mighty empire.

So far as the Jews were concerned, Herod the Great was a pretender to the throne. He was not Jewish and not from the House of David. Nonetheless, Herod set about to win the people’s devotion by launching a massive rebuilding of the temple. His architects and builders removed a portion of the mountaintop and built a structure into which we could have fit twenty-five football fields. In Jesus’ day, the project was still underway. It was finished just in time for the Romans to destroy it in the great war of 67-70AD. Herod also built the fortress at Masada, the massive citadel called Herodium, and the seaport at Caesarea.

Despite his building program, Herod the Great was never able to earn the affection of the Jewish people. They still awaited a true king, anointed by God and from the line of David.

When Herod the Great died in 4BC or so, soon after ordering the murder of the infants in Bethlehem, his sons assumed control of various portions of Herod’s “kingdom.” One of these sons, Herod Antipas, “governed” Galilee and is the Herod who executed John the Baptist and played a key role in Jesus’ trial.

Herod the Great . . . Herod the Paranoid

As Herod the Great approached the end of his life, he sunk deep into paranoia and fear. He became so fearful of being assassinated that in 7-6 BC, he ordered the killing of his once-beloved wife, Mariamne, and two of his sons, Alexander and Aristobolus. This was about the same time as the birth of Jesus. He also ordered that, upon his death, his son Antipater was to be killed and that a number of imprisoned Jewish elders were to be executed as well. Herod wanted to make that his subjects were in mourning when he died, even if they were actually mourning the elders!

The tyrant had become a monster . . . and now there was yet another “rival” to fear. Sadly, Herod’s response is completely predictable.

One day, in about 6 BC, this paranoid and fearful royal beast finds out about a small group of star-watchers from the East, who had come to Jerusalem looking for a newly born King of the Jews.

Herod’s response to this unwelcome news is to call together a group of learned scholars. When he asks them what the Holy Scriptures have to say about the birth of this new king, they tell him that according to the prophet Micah (5:2) it will happen in Bethlehem, a small town about five miles south of Jerusalem and the ancestral home of the House of David. Herod then pointedly instructs these sages from the east that they are to find this baby and report back to Herod – “so I too may go and worship him.” What a self-damning statement. The old despot wants to find the baby only so he could kill him – Herod is a destroyer.

Blessedly, the wise men are no fools. They do find Mary and her baby. They worship this infant and shower him with gifts. Then, having been warned in a dream, they make a beeline for home – ignoring Herod and quickly putting themselves out of his reach.

When Herod finds out that they Magi have outwitted him, he erupts in a cold rage, ordering soldiers to go to Bethlehem and kill all the infant boys two years and under. Herod’s massacre of the innocents is cold and brutal and, sadly, too typical of a harsh and vicious world. Some wonder why such an event would not be recorded outside

Matthew's gospel. The answer is simple, such barbarity was far too common in the world of gladiators and coliseums to warrant much notice.

Perhaps the thing to focus on is Herod's fear of Jesus. N. T. Wright offers us these reflections:

I was once preaching at a big Christmas service where a well-known historian, famous for his skepticism towards Christianity, had been persuaded to attend by his family. Afterwards, he approached me, all smiles.

'I've finally worked out', he declared, 'why people like Christmas.'

'Really?' I said. 'Do tell me.'

'A baby threatens no one,' he said, 'so the whole thing is a happy event which means nothing at all!'

I was dumbfounded. At the heart of the Christmas story in Matthew's gospel is a baby who poses such a threat to the most powerful man around that he kills a whole village full of other babies in order to try to get rid of him. At the heart of the Christmas story in Luke, too, is a baby who, if only the Roman emperor knew it, will be Lord of the whole world. Within a generation his followers will be persecuted by the empire as a danger to good order. Whatever else you say about Jesus, from his birth onwards, people certainly found him a threat. He upset their power-games, and suffered the usual fate of people who do that.

In fact, the shadow of the cross falls over the story from this moment on. Jesus is born with a price on his head. Plots are hatched; angels have to warn Joseph; they only just escape from Bethlehem in time. Herod the Great, who thought nothing of killing members of his own family, including his own beloved wife, when he suspected them of scheming against him, and who gave orders when dying that the leading citizens of Jericho should be slaughtered so that people would be weeping at his funeral—this Herod would not bat an eyelid at the thought of killing lots of little babies in case one of them should be regarded as a royal pretender. As his power had increased, so had his paranoia—a not unfamiliar progression, as dictators around the world have shown from that day to this.

The gospel of Jesus the Messiah was born, then, in a land and at a time of trouble, tension, violence and fear. Banish all thoughts of peaceful Christmas scenes. Before the Prince of Peace had learned to walk and talk, he was a homeless refugee with a price on his head. At the same time, in this passage and several others Matthew insists that we see in Jesus, even when things are at their darkest, the fulfilment of scripture. This is how Israel's redeemer was to appear; this is how God would set about liberating his people, and bringing justice to the whole world. No point in arriving in comfort, when the world is in misery; no point having an easy life, when the world suffers violence and injustice! If he is to be Emmanuel, God-with-us, he must be with us where the pain is.¹

To those of who know Jesus, feeling threatened by him seems so odd, so out of place. How could we possibly fear the one who died to save us, to save the world? Yet, even in his lifetime there were many who feared Jesus, many who wanted to shut him up or worse. They were invested in the status quo, in their positions, in their wealth; the last thing they wanted was for their world to be turned upside down.

But that is exactly what the Christ-child and the Christ-boy and the Christ-man was about. Out with the old; in with the new. The rich brought low and the poor lifted up. The kingdom of God, here and now. The marriage of heaven and earth. Recovery of sight to the blind. The oppressed set free.

Herod was right – he had much to fear. Do we?

¹ Wright, T. (2004). *Matthew for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-15* (pp. 13–15). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

A few keys for reading Matthew

Because of this book's "Jewishness," when you are reading Matthew, always bear in mind Israel's story – the creation, the fall, the calling out of Abraham and the promise of a great nation through whom the world would be blessed, the deliverance from Egypt, Moses and the Law, the idealized King David, and the continual inability of Israel to live up to her end of the covenant with God. Matthew proclaims that Israel's story reached its climax in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

In all likelihood, Matthew had the gospel of Mark available to him when writing his own account of Jesus. Using Mark's action-oriented narrative as the basic structure for his own gospel, Matthew added a beginning (the genealogy and birth story), an ending (the resurrection account), and inserted five blocks of Jesus' teachings. By inserting so much of Jesus' teaching, Matthew emphasizes Jesus' authority as a teacher and the training of his new community in what it means to live in the kingdom of God. Thus, Jesus not only teaches his disciples how they are to live in relationship with one another, but even how the community is to discipline itself. Matthew's focus on Jesus' authority is borne out in the great commission (Matt 28:16-20). Here, Jesus instructs his own disciples to go and make "make disciples of all nations . . . teaching them to obey everything I commanded you."

Despite Matthew's attention to Jesus' authority and teachings, too often, when reading the Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5-7), we tend to see Jesus' teachings as presenting us with an impossible-to-achieve ideal. This is simply too easy a way out. Just as Moses instructed Israel on how they were to live in covenant with God, Jesus teaches his disciples how they (we!) are to live as the renewed people of God. The Sermon on the Mount is profoundly counter-cultural. All the "real world" notions of power and success are turned on their head. Jesus speaks directly to our character, our influence, our righteousness, our devotion, our ambitions, our relationships, and our commitment to Jesus' authority. Jesus instructs his disciples not merely as a wise teacher, but as the Lord of all creation.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. "Wealth is power, greed is good, a gun is strength . . . forgiveness is power, compassion is good, kindness is strength." Herod and Jesus had very different ideas about the nature and use of power. Make a Top Ten List of the contrasts in these two men. What does this list reveal about how we might be contrasted with Jesus? Discuss this quote from D.A. Hare's commentary on today's passage from Matthew: "For us, the contrast can serve to symbolize the internal contrast between that part of the inner self which willingly and joyfully accepts the Lordship of Christ our King and that darker side of the self which firmly and persistently rejects his right to rule. Scoff not at Herod until you have acknowledged the Herod in yourself!"
2. A good starting place would be to consider the fears that we face. What do you find most fearful in your life? Terrorists? Cancer? Financial problems? Job loss? Pressures on your children? When you consider these fears, do you find any themes? Perhaps your fears seem more "mundane." What effect do these fears have on your day-to-day life? How do you deal with fear and anxiety? Why do you think that anxiety medications are among the most-prescribed in our country, the most prosperous on the planet.
3. Who today is threatened by Christmas? Anyone? If Christmas seems utterly non-threatening to everyone, then might we have lost some of the power and truth of the incarnation? Are there no Herods left?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

(These readings all involve Romans and their puppet kings.)

Monday, Mark 6:14-29 John the Baptist is beheaded by Herod Antipas, one of the sons of Herod the Great.	Tuesday, Matthew 8:5-13 Jesus meets a faithful Roman Centurion.
Wednesday, Acts 10 Peter baptizes the Roman Centurion, Cornelius.	Thursday, Acts 23:12-22 A Roman Centurion saves Paul from an assassination plot.
Friday, Acts 25:23 – 26:32 Paul appears before King Agrippa (the latest Roman puppet), who sends him on to be tried in Rome.	Weekly Prayer Concerns

Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible. On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Monday Evening Class – now studying Romans

Meets every Monday from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class – now studying Exodus

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall on Tuesdays.

Scott's 11:00 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

The current series:

The Battle for Christmas:

The Real Story of Christmas in America

Scott's New Book, *Restart: Getting Past Christian-ish*, is available in the St. Andrew bookstore.

Sermon Notes
