

PROTECTING THE CHILD

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At Welcome Time

In terms of the sequence of events and tonight being our celebration of the Christ child's birth we are going to be getting ahead of ourselves in the sermon. But if we are following along the Christmas story as it is

I am going to speak to you today about the threat of Christmas.

laid out in Matthew, as “¹³ Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” ¹⁴ Then Joseph^[a] got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, ¹⁵ and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, “Out of Egypt I have called my son.”

The Massacre of the Infants

¹⁶ When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men,^[b] he was infuriated, and

he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men.^[c] ¹⁷Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

¹⁸“A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled, because they
are no more.”

The Return from Egypt

¹⁹When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, ²⁰“Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child’s life are dead.”

we indeed are, that is the way it goes. We have located the child Jesus in the family tree in first part of chapter 1. We have accepted the child along with Joseph in the second part of chapter 1. We have sought the child along with the Magi in the beginning of chapter 2. Today, in the next turn of that same chapter, we look at protecting the child, protecting the child from the threat of Herod. You and I have Christ in us, what can we learn about protecting our spiritual lives?

At Confession Time

A judge in a courtroom asked the prisoner what he was charged with and the man answered, "Doing my Christmas shopping early." The judge said, "That's not an offense. How early were you doing the shopping?" The prisoner said, "Before the store opened."

A bit of rationalization. A bit of crime. It's stuff humans do. And far worse.

Herod is a main character in our upcoming text. He kills the baby boys age 2 and under in Bethlehem in an attempt to eliminate Jesus. Probably twenty or thirty in total. This was not out of character for him. He had done other such atrocious things.

A bit of rationalization. A bit of crime. Atrocious things. So it is that we come humbly asking for his forgiveness, protection, and guidance. Let us pray.

Sermon

I want to speak to you this morning about the threat of Christmas. I don't want to lose the smiles come from the eggnog, twinkling lights, and especially the great gift of Christ's coming. But if we are going to be true to the Bible's story, there's something for us to look at, a threat.

There's, of course, the threat of overeating, the threat of overspending, the threat of someone stealing your presents out of your car, or even the threat of your home being burglarized while you're visiting relatives (the blockbuster movie, Home Alone, was about just that!). Or that especially terrible threat of unwrapping an awful

looking necktie.¹ This isn't the kind of threat we need to talk about. It's something else, something real, something serious.

We pray.

We like the Christmas birth. We like the peace on earth. We like the Christmastide, the 12 days of Christmas, the bright side of Christmas. But the real Christmas story (and it is a real story), has a not-to-like side, a stark side, a dark side. There's the glory but then there's the gory. I am talking about there's Christ but then there's Herod.

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¹ There was that college student who unwrapped his Christmas present and put his head in his hands moaning, "Grandma, I didn't think when you were asking me if I liked big checks or little checks you were talking about the pattern on a necktie!"

19 When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, 20 "Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead."

Christ comes in and Herod comes out. God comes down and evil rises up. Robert Frost said there is something that doesn't like a wall and the Bible says that there is a Herod, a Satan, a Crucifying Mob that doesn't like a Christ.

This reality is completely historical (there was a Herod)... and completely personal. The coming of Christ into the world, the world, your world, my world, our world, is a blessing to be sure, but not to everyone and everything.

The baby comes on Dec. 25 and Dec. 26th sin is still here. And sin in strong dosage. Christ comes into the world and there is yet Herod in the world.

While that was going on back then and out there, it is also happening right now and in here. There was then and there is now, a Herod. Around us ... and in us, Herod. Herod, aka, opposition to God. Aka sin. Aka "me not thee."

In us. It's the "I don't want to go to church. I don't want to pray. I don't want to give. I don't want to read the Bible. I don't want to try. God's a meanie. He doesn't give me what I want when I want how I want. Pooey on him." All of that is the march of Herod's soldiers in u. I tell you, make a commitment to Christ this morning and you'll find it challenged by nightfall. Herod.

Around us. It's the martyrdom of Christians and pastors in many places of the world. Herod again. Wherever God's goodness takes a physical stand, the devil's malevolence

makes an out-of-proportion counter move. That's Herod and the slaughter of the innocents.

At last year's Global Leadership Summit I was devastated by Gary Haugen's International Justice Mission report of one of their lawyers in Africa, who was helping a man falsely arrested and beaten by corrupt police, himself, and his driver, taken and murdered by those same police. That's Christ coming into an African town and a Herod police department reacting.²

Herod is around us and in us. We say, Let the child come in. We say, Christmas really is when Christ is born in us. But when the child is born, when the child comes, it isn't without pushback. He came to defeat sin but sin will not go silently from the world or from our hearts.

In every heart, yes yours, yes mine, yes his, yes hers, there is that which will maybe go to Bethlehem or that which will maybe stay in Jerusalem trying to hold on to power. There is that which will bend the knee or that which will thrust the sword. There is that which will crown him or that which will kill him. Those are the Christmas facts.

Religion may help ... *in either direction*. Jerusalem was the city of God. Herod built a great Temple. So even with this outward appearance of being religious, there is that which will try to kill the God of the city and Christ of the Temple. Even in church egos may grow and pride may thrive and people may be committed to keeping God in their box rather than being surrendered and following him humbly. Even in church.

² I encourage you to find this talk through GLS 2017. The work of Christ in this is strong, very strong.

Jesus knew this. He experienced the opposition. He is pursued as a baby, tempted as a man, and crucified as a savior.

He taught about opposition. The seed is sown and the hard soil is against it, the birds eat it, the thorns strangle it. The son of the owner of the vineyard comes and they think, we can have it be ours, and they kill him.³ He said I came not to bring peace but a sword, not meaning violence but to stand up as God for God, to have you choose; you choose -- crown him or kill him. You say, I thought he came to bring peace. Yes, if you crown him, you'll have peace.

So if Christmas comes and sin is still here, the Christ candle is lit and Herod tries to snuff it out, ... If Herod is the sin principle in the world, opposition to God, the sin principle in each human heart, what do we do? If Christ is born into our world as he indeed has been, how do *we* crown him *and protect him?*

Well, we must realize *there is* something we can do. We are not unable. The wise men did something. Joseph and Mary did something. There is something we can do to protect the child, the Christ, and the Christian life we have let into us. Don't say, "What can you do?" You can do.

The wise men went home avoiding Herod. Joseph and Mary went to Egypt avoiding Herod. Let's all not walk close to the flame of Herod. Let's avoid the devil. Let's avoid

³ They say, "Get the hell out." He says, "That's what I came to do. Get hell out of you. If need be I'll go to where hell is, to get you out of it and it out of you."

temptation. That's good. That's something that you can do.⁴

You can also count the cost and go all in. That's what Jesus said to do. Look, Joseph and Mary didn't want to become refugees. They didn't want to go on the open road. They didn't want to face heat and dust and cold. They didn't want to learn Egyptian. They didn't want to get a Green Card or be looked at as immigrants. They paid a price. But that Jesus was the hope for the world made it worth it.

And if you and I want to protect the child, we can't be ho-hum, half in, half out, lackadaisical, that's no way to protect a child. You don't want a babysitter who's smooching with her boyfriend instead of watching your kids. You want her dedicated to them.

We might say of Joseph's journey to Egypt that that's quite a price. But what's the price of not doing so? I tell the children there's no way not to pay a price in studying in school. You pay the price of studying now and get the win of a good exam or you get the win of not studying now and pay the price of a loss on the exam. Or worse, feeling the need to cheat and succumbing to it. Either way there's a price. There is no such thing as not price. There's a cost to following Jesus but it is nothing compared to the cost of not following him.

Look at the cost of not following. Herod's an imposter. He is not a true bloodline for the throne in Judah. He's trying to hold on to power, trying to be what he isn't. Aren't we all imposters trying to hold on to our power ... saying no to

⁴ Before this, one way Joseph and Mary took care of Jesus was to take him to "church." That's the way I'd put them giving the two doves for an offering and getting him circumcised. If you want to develop the Christ born in you, go to church.

God ... and what kind of chaos do we end up having? What kind of exhaustion? How many lives are harmed in the process? How's that working for you?? That's a cost of not following.

Herod stomps and Christ invites. Yes, there's a cost to having him come into your world, and protecting him, but he teaches you how to live ... and live with peace, abundantly, with an easy yoke. There's a cost but look at the benefits! It's a deal.

Change is the other thing we can do to protect the child. I knew a man who said as a ten year old with a bb gun he was tempted to shoot out streetlights. But in his sixties he wasn't much tempted by that anymore. That's the real protection. When Herod doesn't even make a blip on your radar screen.

We cannot change without grace but that is what grace is for, to change. We are all responsible for the persons we are becoming, for our character. We can't opt out.

Mother Theresa cultivated a spiritual life. Adolf Hitler cultivated a spiritual life. Bill Clinton was once asked why he had an affair with Monica Lewinsky and he said for the worst of all possible reasons, because he could. But someone else observed that that was patently not true. He had cultivated a life of lasciviousness such that when the moment came he could hardly do other.

So if we are to protect the child really, and if it is not going to be just sin suppression, and immorality avoidance, we must change inside. How then is the question? By having Christ in us and teaching us and reigning with us every single day ... changing us.

The Wise Men changed. The Wise Men could very well have been tempted to return to Jerusalem and the

comforts of that city, the special treatment of Herod. They had journeyed a long ways and to have Herod fawning over them could have been fun. But you know they simply weren't interested. Why? Because they had changed. How? They had seen the real king. Once you have seen the real king, who needs a fake one?⁵

When you've seen the real thing, you don't need anything else. I've been to the Holy Land and seen the real thing; I'm not going to be bowled over by the Holy Land Experience in Orlando.

So friends, this Christmas, there's a threat to the child. But protect the child by looking at the child. He's the real thing. Quit playing at God and going after toy gods and get to know the real God.

Amen? Amen.⁶

If you would like to talk with someone about this message or your spiritual life, or to have someone pray with you, the pastors, and elders of the church would welcome your call.

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⁵ T.S. Eliot shares this in his *Journey of the Wise Men*.

⁶ Just a little smile to add in. After all that good protecting of Jesus that Joseph and Mary did, when he was 12 years old they left Jerusalem without him!