

HOLY MOMENT 4: DECISION

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Pastor Jeff Wood

ROI Life isn't measured best by time but rather by moments. "Tell me about 1992" is different than "Tell me about some of the special moments in your life." We've been looking at holy moments in the story of the first Christmas than can be holy moments for us in this Christmas.

This is where we have been. There was the moment of obedience – God spoke to Joseph and he obeyed; the moment of surrender – God asked Mary and she surrendered; the moment of beholding – God invited shepherds to come and see and they went and beheld, with their eyes and with their minds and with their hearts. Today the holy moment of a particular decision and will it be your decision?

SERMON I once was building shelves up in the attic. I completed them and then I added box after box. When I came to the very end of the shelf, I put on the last box. When I did that the whole shelf collapsed. That's the feeling of this passage, isn't it. We have beautiful thoughts -- blessings pronounced, God glorified, parents mystified -- then there's this verse that seems to make the wonder collapse.

This happens in the Bible. For example, Psalm 139 is that beautiful psalm about being known in our mother's womb and God knowing our world from the rising of the sun to the setting of the same. There is all that wonder and then, towards the tail end, there I, 'I hate their guts; I wish you would slay them.' We tend not to read those. They don't fit the decorum so we put them in the closet. But it's a part of the story.

We all want a Christmas with the softness of a lullaby not the hardness of a sword. We want a Christmas with a sweetness to it but not a bite to it. We want a comforting Christmas but not a confronting Christmas. What does the Bible give us? Both the lullaby and the sword.

Pray Read

It is not just on this Herod and his murderous pursuit of Jesus that there is Christmas story harshness. It's the same story apocalyptically delivered the Book of Revelation chapter 12. There a special woman is going to give birth and a dragon awaits the delivery so that he may devour the child. This is, at least in the initial sense, Mary, Jesus, hated by Herod (and his spiritual father, Satan).¹

The question is why this harshness in the Christmas accounts? The simple answer is because it is truth. The world is not all Christmas and no sword. Any casual glance at the world reveals that and so we can appreciate that whatever else Christ may be, he is a realist. Who he is and what he does is not geared to function for fiction or Hallmark life but real life.

But this truth is also message. It is a serious message for you and me and anyone who would receive the Christ of Christmas. It is a message of great import; after all, Herod was set on murder – *not detante, not alliance, not a handshake* but *the elimination* of Christ then, and, get this, in you and me even today.

This is the pre-holy moment, the awareness that there is *sometimes sneaky, sometimes beguiling, sometimes violent* opposition to Christ and your spiritual life with him.

1. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that it might devour her child the moment he was born. ⁵She gave birth to a son, a male child, who “will rule all the nations with an iron scepter.” And her child was snatched up to God.

This can be as simple (ha! I say simple but it is hardly simple) as

- material reality at odds with the spiritual,
- the mortal body with the immortal soul,
- the temporal with the eternal,
- the seen with the unseen,
- our lesser selves with our higher selves.

The former is always, always attempting to dominate, to distract from, to overlook, to eliminate the latter.

I used to volunteer on Sunday afternoons at a DuPage County juvenile delinquent facility on Sunday afternoons. These I did because I felt a Christ sending me to join this Christian ministry that other students were doing. Virtually *every single* Sunday just before the time came to go to these facilities, I would have thoughts of -- I have a cold coming on so I shouldn't go, or I've got more studying to do for this exam tomorrow so I shouldn't go, or my friends are going out for pizza so I should skip. When I resisted and persevered with my decision, every single time I felt solidified in Christ. And when I didn't, I felt spiritually scattered. That mental opposition to going was straight from Herod. "Let's quell and then quiet and then eliminate the spiritual life. In this move of Jeff's, in that move of Jeff's, let's sideline him."

And if we don't enter this pre-holy moment of awareness that this opposition is the case, is real, is critical, then we won't enter the holy moment of deciding that we are firmly with and for the eternal, of deciding that we will fight for it, and our lives will, based on that decision, have a completely different character. John Owen, the Puritan, put it starkly. "You best be killing sin or it be killing you."

- No Switzerland neutrality is possible,
- no by-standing,
- no drifting,
- no domesticating,
- no making friends with a cobra.

Without this holy moment decision of fighting for God and against evil,

- Christmas is just nostalgia, not a power;
- cotton candy not nourishment;
- fencing with the wind, not making real change on the ground.

I knew a couple that confessed their first five years of marriage were hard until he realized that subconsciously he didn't want to be married. Married not married was his condition. Can we be Christian, not Christian? And he had to fight that, make a decision, fight for that decision, protect his marriage, nurture that decision. He had to, if you will, take his wife and his marriage on a journey of protection to Egypt. And that is when the Christmas of romantic idealism in their life became the power of actual, meaningful love.

The recent movie on Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran theologian who opposed Hitler and paid for it with his life, was keenly aware that following Christ meant deciding yes and no. He could not say yes to God without saying no to evil. "Silence in the face of evil is itself evil. God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act." And I'll add, "Not to decide is to decide." The Barmen Declaration, a confession in our own church constitution, which Bonhoeffer helped write, has in its structure, "I confess this but plainly reject this." The "this" gets specific. Anybody can be a generalist here but it must become specific.

Joseph and Mary said Yes to God and No to Herod. They took the child to Egypt for protection and development of his life. Are you protecting the spiritual life you've been given – not just generally but specifically?

Look at it this way when you say yes to the beauty of marriage you should also be prepared to know that it will take a struggle to make your marriage and to protect your marriage. In order to say yes to the beauty of marriage you must say no specifically –

- to the thoughts of not sharing deeply with your partner,
- you must say no specifically to the thoughts of criticizing your partner.
- You must say no specifically to unforgiveness towards your partner.
- You must say no specifically to interlopers.
- You must say no specifically to not praying for your partner.

You see, to say yes to the beauty of marriage as God intends for it for you, you must say no to what is antithetical or unhealthy for this.

When we say yes to Christ we say no to other things that would be detrimental to Christ or opposed to Christ.

- The Herod around us and the Herod within us says *don't go to church* and we say no to him.
- The Herod around us and the Herod within us says *don't pray*, but we say no to him.

- The Herod around us and in us says *don't leave your bad influences and relationships*, but we say no to him.
- The Herod around us and in us says *it's just a little vice*, but we say no to him.
- The Herod around us and in us says *just be silent when we witness oppression*, but we say no to him.
- The Herod around us and in us says *don't confess your sins; after all, that was just a mistake and you don't want people to know your weakness*, but we say no to him.
- The Herod around us and in us says *don't give your money generously to Kingdom causes because you need it for yourself* and we say no to him.
- The Herod around us and within us says *don't break those lust habits, gossip habits, ingratitude habits, resentment habits because they're not bad for you*, but we know they are and say no to him.

It used to be Christians would say I don't smoke or chew or go with girls who do. And the Christians in that church would sing they'll know we are Christians by what we don't do. And that is somewhat but not completely what I am saying here. What I am saying is that seriously, categorically, decisively you have to say no to certain things in order to say yes to more important things. No to Herod to say Yes to Christ. Without this Christmas becomes nothing.

We here today meet to keep each other honest, to keep each other awake, to keep each other in the fight for Christ in our lives. So this is, and let it be, our holy moment, us here today. Amen.

*If you'd like to talk with someone about this message
or your spiritual life, or to have someone pray
with you, the pastors & elders of the church
would welcome your call.
revjeffwood@gmail.com*

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH of SEBASTIAN

1405 Louisiana Ave. Sebastian, FL 32958

Phone: 772-589-5656

www.WeLoveFirst.Org [Facebook.com/WeLoveFirstSebastian](https://www.facebook.com/WeLoveFirstSebastian)