

Sermon: “What a Big Baby Herod Was to be Afraid of a Little Baby!”

Scripture Reading: Matt. 2:1-23

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What a big baby King Herod was to be afraid of a little baby! But what else should we expect from a tyrant? Herod was a tyrant. A tyrant is a political leader who puts his own personal concerns above truth and justice. Yet, by definition, a political leader should always be guided by truth and justice. “Politics” comes from the Greek word for “city” (*polis*) as in *Minneapolis* or *Indianapolis*. Politics is thus about governing the affairs of the city, and by extension the affairs of the state or nation. The aim of politics is to create a just society. But since there can be no justice where there is no truth, a tyrant’s lies serve to conceal the injustice of his rule. Let’s look at the story of Herod to see why tyrants are always threatened by the truth.

Herod was the King of the Jews. Yet he was of dubious Jewish heritage. His father was an Idumean, that is, from the land of ancient Edom, who had converted to Judaism. Moreover, Herod was appointed to be king by the Romans, a foreign occupying power. Not surprisingly, many Jews looked with suspicion on Herod and questioned the legitimacy of his rule. As a result, Herod was very insecure. He was constantly trying to prove his legitimacy as their king. One thing he did to try to win the loyalty of the Jewish people was to renovate the temple in Jerusalem when it badly needed repairs. Yet even this did not convince all Jews that Herod was a legitimate ruler. So, Herod was insecure, just as all tyrants are insecure of their hold on power.

The story in Matthew’s Gospel begins when wise men from the East come to Jerusalem because they have seen a strange star in the sky. Although the wise men are not Jews, they have understood that the star is a sign that the Christ, the messiah, has been born, one who is to rule as

the King of the Jews because he has been appointed by God to represent on earth what God represents in heaven: truth and justice. Even though they aren't Jews themselves, the wise men know that a king who rules in God's stead has significance for the entire world, and not for the Jews alone. Truth and justice are universal concerns, not merely Jewish concerns. But when Herod hears what the wise men have to say, he is disturbed; he is threatened by the prospect of an ideal King of the Jews who carries God's stamp of approval precisely because he rules with justice and truth, since Herod knows in his own heart that his rule is neither just nor truthful. For this reason, he seeks to destroy the newborn child whose star has appeared in the sky and been seen by the wise men. But note well: Herod isn't honest about his intentions; instead, he does what he always does: he tells a lie. He asks the wise men to inform him of the whereabouts of the child, in order that he too may go and worship him. Herod attempts to deceive the wise men into believing that he wants to worship the messiah and that he cares about what they care about.

Fortunately, an angel warns Joseph that Herod intends to kill Jesus. So, Joseph takes his wife Mary and their son Jesus and flees to Egypt, where they will be refugees seeking asylum from a tyrannical ruler. It's ironic that these Jews seek refuge in Egypt, since centuries earlier Egypt was the land from which the Hebrew slaves under Moses' leadership had fled in search of freedom. But now that their own homeland has become a political nightmare on account of a tyrant, Joseph and Mary have to leave their own country and become immigrants. Just think: if Egypt had not been willing to accept these immigrants, Jesus might have died. For Herod had ordered his soldiers to murder all baby boys under two years of age in the city of Bethlehem.

Whenever we read the Bible, we should look for parallels to our own time or to recent history so that we can appreciate the lesson the Bible is trying to teach us. The parallel that came immediately to my mind as I pondered our text was that of the church in Nazi Germany. In 1933

Hitler became the leader of Germany entirely through legal means. Prior to Hitler, Germany had been a democracy. But once he and his Nazi party came to power, they proceeded to dismantle the democratic institutions that could keep in check the rule of a tyrant. Hitler himself was not actually a German, but an Austrian. And though he was raised as a Catholic, he repudiated all the values associated with genuine Christianity: love, mercy, justice, and truth. His worldview was racist and anti-Semitic: he aimed to rid Europe of the Jews, the people of Jesus, the people of the Bible. Yet Hitler disguised himself as a Christian, even though he was a barbarian who posed a threat to all the values of Western civilization. For him and his party, might made right!

Sadly, most Germans lent their support to Hitler, or at least did not oppose him. And since Germany was officially a Christian nation, this means that the majority of German Christians offered no resistance to him. In fact, Hitler was able to put the churches entirely under his control. The pulpit became a tool of Nazi propaganda. The bishops hailed Hitler as God's chosen leader appointed to make Germany supreme in the world: *Deutschland über alles* ("Germany above all else"). Even though everything Hitler stood for was antithetical to genuine Christian faith, the vast majority of German Christians were complicit in his reign of terror. They not only turned a blind eye to his evil, but they even convinced themselves that it was possible to be both a Christian and a Nazi. The cause of the gospel of Christ was betrayed.

In this situation, a minority of Christians realized that the church had lost its integrity by selling out to Hitler and his hateful agenda. They refused to participate any longer in the official churches that had been co-opted by Hitler. They formed their own oppositional church and called it the "Confessing Church" because they confessed that Jesus Christ alone was their Lord, and they refused to acknowledge any other lord beside him. They also established their own seminaries, even though these were illegal, so that they could train ministers whose preaching

and teaching would not be tainted by Nazi ideology. When I was a student in Germany, I met some of the ministers who had been trained in these illegal seminaries and who had served as pastors in the Confessing Church. One of these men I met also spent time in a concentration camp for his work on behalf of the Confessing Church; his task had been to sneak information about the situation in Germany to churches in other countries so that they could at least know that not all Germans had sold out their Christian faith to Hitler and not all Germans believed in his racist, anti-Semitic ideology. In Germany itself, these dissenting Christians were seen as traitors to their country, but they were in fact its true heroes, because loyalty to God required of them that they resist the tyrant in any way they could. During World War II, these Christians prayed for the defeat of Germany in order that the soul of their nation might be redeemed and that Western civilization might not be entirely destroyed by Hitler's madness. Just imagine their plight: a tyrant has taken over your country and almost the entire populace is under the spell of his lies. Your country once stood for values that you still hold dear, even though the tyrant has trampled them all under foot. Your country was the land that gave birth to the Reformation, yet now the Protestant churches have betrayed the cause of the gospel for which Luther and his followers fought so hard to defend, even at the risk of their own lives. Your country was once a respected nation in Europe that embodied the humane values of Western civilization and the Enlightenment; it had been a center of culture, philosophy, science, literature, music, and art; yet now the most talented minds have been silenced or forced into exile (such as Albert Einstein). Not only your religious faith but even patriotism itself requires that you work for the defeat of your own nation, since it no longer represents the Christian and civilized values it once stood for.

In this situation, the Confessing Christians who opposed Hitler and sought to keep the gospel free from the lies of Nazi propaganda now came to appreciate the utter importance of the

church for their lives in a completely new way. Hitherto, they could take the church for granted; when you live in a democracy that respects individual liberty and freedom of conscience, it's easy to lose sight of why the church is so important. But in a totalitarian dictatorship like that of Nazi Germany, the church was one of the few remaining places in the society where truth and justice had not been trampled on. (Of course, I'm talking only about the Confessing Church that resisted Hitler's influence in the sphere of the church, not the official churches that endorsed Hitler and claimed he was God's chosen leader.) Imagine that you now live in a world where lies are the order of the day since that is what the tyrant demands in order to conceal the injustice of his rule! Where do you go to find true human community that is not poisoned by lies and untruth, by injustice and hatred of your fellow human being? These Christians now realized for the first time in their lives the indispensable importance of the church and what it stands for; they grasped that, under the conditions of dictatorship, the church was an oasis of genuine humanity in a world of brutal inhumanity. They understood what was really at stake in the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ and why loyalty to God is more important than every other loyalty: not Germany above all else, but God above all else! And loyalty to God demands truth and justice.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was one of the leaders of the Confessing Church. A gifted preacher and theologian, he led one of those illegal seminaries. I knew some of his students. Bonhoeffer was given the opportunity to immigrate to the United States when it became apparent that his life was in danger in Germany. He was called to be a professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York. Yet after only one semester in America, he decided to return to Germany. He came to realize that he would have no right to play a leading role in the reconstruction of Germany and the church after the war if he didn't suffer with his fellow Germans during Hitler's reign of terror. So, at the risk of his own life, he gave up his asylum here in the United State and headed

back for Germany. Once there, however, he was arrested and executed by hanging, just a month before the end of the war and Germany's defeat by the Allied Forces. He was only 39 years old, with much life ahead of him yet to live and much yet to offer both the church and the world. His letters from prison, published after his death, are some of the most compelling spiritual literature produced in the 20th century. In a particularly striking passage, Bonhoeffer writes about the importance of the church: "What happens here in the church when the gospel of God's grace is proclaimed to us? The darkness of our lives is dispelled by light, despair is conquered by hope, and hate is overcome by love. The bewildering labyrinth of the life we have lived so far is shattered. We begin to know in our heart that there is a God who loves us, accepts us, and that by our side is a brother or a sister, whom God loves as much as God loves us. From now on, we are free for God and for our neighbor. From now on, we live by faith, hope, and love." These words were written by someone who knew he was about to die because of his commitment to the gospel and Christ's church. They were not written by someone who took the church for granted.

Taking the church for granted was the problem with us modern Christians, as Bonhoeffer came to believe. In our ease and comfort, we had become complacent about the church. For too long, we had treated the church as though it were just another optional voluntary organization like a club or a special interest group. He said that we modern Christians had cheapened God's grace by forgetting that the Christian life involves sacrifice, involves taking up our cross and following Jesus, even if that means that, literally, like Jesus, we too have to be willing to give up our lives for the sake of the gospel, i.e., for the sake of what is right, true, good, and just. Although we continue to proclaim that God has given us salvation through Christ as a gift, by grace alone, we have forgotten that grace comes with a price, a price for God and a price for ourselves. As the apostle Paul reminds us, "God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself"

(2 Cor. 5:19). The cross reminds us that God's love for us in Christ is suffering love, costly love. While the baby Jesus was saved from death at the hands of one tyrant, Herod, the man Jesus was killed by another tyrant, Pilate. It is no accident that the cross is the central symbol of our faith.

The murder of innocent children in Bethlehem shows that there are no lengths to which a tyrant won't go to secure his insecure grasp on power. It shows the abysmal brutality of tyranny. To the extent that a tyrant has any conscience left at all, he knows that he is telling lies about his rule. That's why he is insecure; he knows that revelation of the truth will uncover his lies and he will be exposed. For the wise men, the birth of the messiah signaled that God rejects tyranny and aims to replace it with a political rule that is based entirely on truth and justice: the kingdom of God overseen by God's anointed who rules with righteousness. But precisely this is what Herod couldn't abide. It's also what Hitler couldn't abide. God's messiah is a threat to all tyrants, just as the true proclamation of the gospel is a threat to all tyrants; that's why a tyrant has to pretend that he too wants to worship the messiah, as Herod falsely told the wise men; and that's why Hitler couldn't simply destroy the German churches but had to manipulate them for his purposes. But in both cases, God thwarted the purposes of the tyrant. The angels warned the wise men not to return to Herod; and Hitler chose suicide rather than face an international court of justice.

When the wise men followed the star and found Jesus, "they rejoiced exceedingly" and "fell down and worshipped him. Then opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh" (Matt. 2:11). They gave Jesus their costliest gifts, the most precious gifts they had to offer because they understood the importance of God sending his messiah into this world that is so often dominated by lies, injustice, and lack of respect for persons. When Bonhoeffer and his fellow Confessing Christians came to realize the utter importance of the church for their lives, they risked everything to support it in the face of Nazi tyranny and terror.

Here in the United States we can be glad that our nation is a democracy and that we have freedom of religion. But can we ever take this for granted? Can we ever be complacent about our political and religious freedom? Civilization is a very fragile thing. What would we do if, God forbid, a barbaric tyranny should arise that overtakes our society? What place would the church then have in our lives? What if, in such a situation, the church was the only place left in our society where truth and justice still reigned? Would we take the existence of the church for granted? Would we treat God's grace as cheap? Or would we be willing, like the wise men, to bring our costliest gifts to preserve it? Would we have the courage of a Bonhoeffer to risk our lives for the sake of the church in a society dominated by lies and liars as well as by brutality and inhumanity towards our fellow human beings? What are we willing to sacrifice on behalf of the church? How much do we value the church? What would we lose if it disappeared entirely?

It may seem strange that Matthew follows the joyous story of the messiah's birth with this horrific tale about Herod who tries to kill God's messiah before he can even begin his work among us. But there is a reason for this. Our joy at Christmas cannot be superficial and sentimental; it has to be a deep and profound joy that is rooted in our faith that, because God is sovereign, God judges the evil of this world with its lies and injustice. Therefore, the Christmas message is about the salvation of the world *and* the judgment of the world, and it can't be the message of salvation without also being the message of judgment. Moreover, it serves to remind us that God's grace is not cheap; it wasn't cheap for God and it shouldn't be cheap for us. Our Advent and Christmas season has also been our season of stewardship; and so, we are being asked: What gifts are we willing to bring to the messiah? What sacrifices are we willing to make for the church? Are we willing to give our costliest gifts of time, talents, and money for the sake of this church and its ministry so that God and God's messiah may be above all else in our lives?