

## **THE JOURNEY AWAY FROM CHRISTMAS: THE STORY OF HEROD** **Matthew 2: 13-18, Jeremiah 31:15, Hosea 11:1**

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Christmas is over. All of the presents and packages have been opened. The Christmas tree is sitting on the curb. The lights and the decorations are ready to be put away. Yes, Christmas is over and with it, for many, the joy of the season. Yes, there will be New Year's Eve parties tonight and perhaps a little too much to drink. But all in all, there's a certain note of sadness that creeps into our lives after the Christmas holidays. Let's be honest, who enjoys taking down all the Christmas ornaments and putting them back in their boxes for next year? It's kind of depressing.

The same was true with regards to that first Christmas. Yes, there was the excitement in the Temple when Jesus was officially presented unto the Lord, a ceremony that all Jewish parents did for their first born sons. Simeon, one of the priests in the temple, went out of his way to bless the child saying, "Now let your servant depart in peace. For with my eyes have seen your salvation" (Luke 2:29-30). The Holy Spirit had revealed to him that he would not die until he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Then there was Anna, the old prophetess, who lived in the temple. She praised God and told everyone about this child who would be the redemption of Israel. But even on this joyous occasion there was a note of sadness, a note of impending doom. After Simeon had blessed their Son, he spoke to Mary in a personal way. He said, "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too" (Luke 2:34-35). Those words, I suspect, were less than comforting for Mary and a warning of what would come to pass in the future.

Thankfully, a while later, we really don't know how long, those mysterious Magi showed up at her door. I imagine their visit was disquieting, strange potentates from the East that looked and acted nothing like the people who lived in Bethlehem. Unfortunately, Joseph was not at home, probably working to earn a little income. Having left Nazareth with no financial resources, they were desperately poor. That's why the gifts of the Magi were warmly welcomed. They could sell them for hard currency. What troubled her, however, was the fact that these men, obviously far better off than she or her husband had actually bowed down and worshipped her little toddler. What did all of that mean? Beginning with the visit of the angel Gabriel, her life had been turned upside down, one surprise coming after another. She knew that her Son was special. His name, Jesus, meant "God's salvation." But what it meant and how it would all play out was a mystery beyond her comprehension. But one thing was for sure. She treasured the memories of everything that had happened and pondered them in her heart. In God's good timing He would reveal their meaning.

Little did she know that there was someone in Jerusalem who knew exactly what they

meant and he was not happy. His name was Herod, the appointed King of the Jews. He had acquired that title through deception and intrigue. He was not even Jewish. He was from a tribe of people who lived to the south of Judea, descendants of Esau, the disinherited brother of Jacob. At best he could be considered half-Jewish. But to be perfectly honest, he was nothing more than a petty tyrant who had been appointed by the Romans. So in order to ingratiate himself to his Jewish subjects, he built them a brand new temple, a beautiful edifice, even though it looked more Greek than Middle Eastern in terms of its design. In fact, it was so massive that some of the outer walls remain to this day, a place known as the "Wailing Wall." Jewish people go there to pray because it's the only part of the Temple grounds that remain. However, in spite of all that he had done, he knew that the Jewish people despised him and he lived in fear that someone would rise up to take his throne.

As he grew older this fear became all consuming. He turned against his family, assassinating one of his wives and three of his own sons. To make matters worse, he was vindictive and cruel. His hatred for anyone who disliked him, or whom he considered to be a threat knew no bounds. For example, he instructed his soldiers to kill every influential person in Jerusalem after his death. Caesar Augustus, the Roman Emperor, remarked, "It is better to be Herod's pig than to be his son." It's no wonder then that when the Wise Men arrived and inquired as to the whereabouts of the newborn King of the Jews, Herod and all of Jerusalem were troubled. That's putting it mildly. Heads could roll, especially religious heads. Herod had already killed a number of the Sanhedrin, the religious leaders of the people. I am sure that they responded with trembling lips when he inquired of them as to where this Christ Child was to be born. Then being told that Bethlehem was the birthplace, Herod turned on the charm. He inquired of the Wise Men as to when the natal star had appeared. Then he said to them, "Go and make a careful search for the Child. As soon as you find Him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship Him" (Matthew 2:8).

Herod played nice with the Wise Men. He could have thrown them into prison, but that was not necessary. They told him everything he needed to know and besides these were international guests of high standing. So he sent them on their way and hoped he would hear back. He probably patted himself on the back after they left saying, "I really am a sly old fox." But he wasn't and that became clearly evident when the Wise Men slipped away without returning to Jerusalem. That's when Herod's anger and hatred of the Jewish people, the people over whom he ruled, expressed itself in vile savagery. He ordered his soldiers to go and kill every child in the town of Bethlehem who was under two years of age. Even if the star had only appeared a year ago, he wanted to cover all of his bases, to make sure this claimant to his throne would never survive.

Wanting to highlight the horror of what had transpired in Bethlehem, the gospel writer, Matthew, quoted an Old Testament passage of Scripture. In chapter 2, verse 18 of his account of the birth of Christ, he wrote, "A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more" (Jeremiah 31:15). We've all heard someone say, "Well so and so must have

turned over in their grave when that happened.” Well, that’s what the prophet Jeremiah was saying about Rachel, one of the beloved ancestors of the Jewish people. He pictured her weeping in her grave. Thousands of her children were walking past her tomb in 587 BC as they went into exile in a foreign land.

Now hundreds of years later, the same thing was happening all over again. Only this time it was the murder of little children that brought tears to her eyes. Rachel could not rest in peace, because twice over she had witnessed, even from the grave, the horror of innocent lives pulled from the grasp of those who loved them so dearly. The first time it had been a foreign invader, King Nebuchadnezzar from Babylon. Now it was another king named Herod who was just as cruel and unfortunately a lot closer.

Whether we like it or not, this final episode during our journey to Christmas, which has become, in fact, a journey away from Christmas, possesses a word of warning that we all need to hear. There are Herods in our world today. One of them resides in Russia and there are many others as well, including a whole host of terrorist organizations. But they are not the only ones. Throughout the world there are many individuals, some of them in high places, who are just as paranoid as Herod and who hate Christ and those who follow Him just as passionately as did Herod. Unfortunately, a growing number of them live right here among us. Their goal is to remove the presence of Christ and if necessary His people as well. Yes, you could say that I’m an alarmist. But I’ve been around a long time and I’ve seen what’s happening to religious freedom, even right here in America. It’s gradually slipping away and being replaced with an open hostility towards Christianity. In other places around the world it’s even worse. More Christians are being killed today because of their faith than at any other time in human history. Yes, there are plenty of Herods in our world today and they are trying to do the same thing that that the first Herod tried to do. Like him they want to snuff out the life of Christ and the lives of those who follow Him.

Fortunately, Herod failed and so will they. Our journey to Christmas, even our journey after Christmas doesn’t end with the wailing of grief stricken parents. It continues on with a mother and father fleeing into Egypt with their Son. Joseph had been awakened by another dream from on high. An angel told him in that dream, “Get up. Take the child and His mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him” (Matthew 2:13). That very night, perhaps the night immediately following the visit of the Wise Men, Joseph gathered up the family’s few possessions and using some of the money they had been given, purchased a donkey for Mary and the Child. Even as the stars were twinkling brightly overhead, this trio of refugees headed down the coastal highway to safety. Thus Matthew wrote, remembering another Old Testament Scripture, “Out of Egypt I called My Son” (Hosea 11:1). The writer of those words was the ancient prophet Hosea and he was referring to the children of Israel and their deliverance from slavery in Egypt, when Moses led them to freedom. Once again, Matthew reasoned, God was doing the same thing. Only this time He was leading the Christ Child and His parents not away from Egypt but to Egypt. It would be a safe and secure place for them to reside

until the death of Herod, which was not that far off. Herod was a sickly, old evil tyrant. His demise would be welcomed by a lot of people.

The same is true with regards to you and me. Tyrants and all the evil which surrounds them do not last forever. The light and the love of Christ always wins out. It may take a long time, sometimes even centuries, but eventually the light of God overtakes and destroys the darkness. That's what happened when God said, "Let there be light," at the moment of creation. It swept away the darkness and that's what happened once again when He sent His Son into our world. He swept away the darkness.

Years ago I wrote a Christmas play about the birth of Christ. It told the entire story, beginning to end, from Zechariah and Elizabeth to Herod and the Holy Family's flight into Egypt. I asked myself, "How can I end this play on a positive note with a character like Herod in the script? It was a daunting question that troubled me for a long time. Then one day, I remembered a calligraphical painting that was created by a well-known artist by the name of Michel Podesta. His children were students in the same Christian school where my children attended. I went to his studio and looked once again at the painting I had seen earlier. Underneath the drawing there was a Scriptural caption. It was taken from the first chapter in the gospel of John, "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:5). That was it. That was the final victorious note on which the play needed to end.

So this morning I want you to visualize this scene. In fact, you're a part of it. You're looking out the picture window of your home along with a group of family and friends. It's a dark night with only a little starlight to brighten the landscape. Off in the distance you see a family heading into the darkness. They are obviously of Middle Eastern origin. The father, warmly dressed, is holding a lantern in his left hand to brighten the direction in which he is headed down a dusty road. In his right hand he's holding a lead line to a little donkey bravely following in his footsteps. On that donkey a mother is seated holding a little boy wrapped in a warm blanket. The glow of the lantern forms a halo of light around them. This family is obviously in a hurry, heading out into the unknown. But they are not afraid for they know that the light of God cannot be extinguished by the darkness, even the darkness of a malevolent Herod. Their names are Mary and Joseph and the young child in her arms is Jesus, God's Salvation.

During each of the Sundays in December, we have been on a journey to Christmas. That journey is now over. In fact, we're moving away from the celebration of this wonderful holiday. Nevertheless we can move forward into the future, even the unknown future of a new year, without hesitation. The light of Christ goes before us and in Him and in Him alone we have nothing to fear.