

Messiah Moravian Church
December 29, 2019
First Sunday after Christmas Day

HEROD'S WAR ON CHRISTMAS

The First Sunday After Christmas is often dubbed Low Sunday. The excitement of the season has waned. Favorite carols have been sung and resung, some more times than we would prefer. For many church members it is a time to withdraw and recoup for the new year ahead. Certainly the mood suggests that we move beyond the familiar sights and sounds of the season and focus on the coming year.

In W.H. Auden's remarkable poem *For The Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio*, he describes these days after Christmas when we return to our familiar routines:

Well, so that is that. Now we must dismantle the tree,
Putting the decorations back into their cardboard boxes
Some have got broken – and carrying them up to the attic.
The holly and the mistletoe must be taken down and burnt,
And the children got ready for school.
There are enough Left-overs to do, warmed-up, for the rest of the week
Not that we have much appetite, having drunk such a lot,
Stayed up so late, attempted – quite unsuccessfully
To love all of our relatives, and in general
Grossly overestimated our powers. Once again
As in previous years we have seen the actual Vision and failed
To do more than entertain it as an agreeable
Possibility, once again we have sent Him away....

In today's Gospel lesson the holy family is also back in their first century routines. The cuddly sheep, the placid cows, the joyful angels, the humble shepherds, the exotic scholars are all gone. Now joy and delight have given way to brutality and terror. Herod's war on Christmas is not a story we really want to hear since it reminds us that the agents of violence are still very much at work in this world. And yet that is exactly why we must hear the story because it illustrates God's response to terrible violence and brutal power. Herod was a complex, volatile man. Racially, he was an Arab. His father came from an Arab tribe in Idumea, while his mother came from Petra, the capital of the Arab kingdom of Nabatea.

Religiously, he was a Jew, perhaps not a very conscientious Jew, but a Jew nevertheless who rebuilt the Temple in Jerusalem.

Culturally, Herod was Greek. His first language was Greek and several times he unsuccessfully tried to turn Jerusalem into a Greek city.

Politically, Herod was Roman. He fawned at his Roman overlords at every chance and ruled his

kingdom only because the Roman emperor explicitly authorized him to do so. Yet Herod kept the peace, and that's all that really mattered to Rome. They could care less about his methods or paranoid madness.

He was an exceedingly violent man. He fought at least 10 wars as general of his army. In his own family, he ordered two of his sons to be strangled after suspecting they were plotting against him. When he thought his favorite wife Mariamne was turning disloyal, he killed her too. Caesar is alleged to have said, "It is better to be Herod's pig than his son."

And while Herod's order to kill the children of Bethlehem does not appear in the other Gospels or in any other historical sources of the era, his cruelty and propensity for violence certainly places the event within the realm of possibility.

Author Kathleen Norris says that, "Everything Herod does, he does out of fear. Fear can be a useful defense mechanism, but when a person is always on the defensive like Herod, it becomes debilitating and self-defeating. Herod symbolizes the terrible destruction that fearful people can leave in their own wake... if they have power but can only use it in furtive, pathetic and futile attempts at self-preservation."

Matthew's birth narrative is a carefully constructed attempt to persuade his predominantly Jewish readers that Jesus is the new Moses. Two key parts of that literary device are in today's reading. Just as Moses was born under the evil ruler Pharaoh, Jesus is also born under the evil King Herod. And just as Moses needed to escape the slaughter of all the Jewish newborns, Jesus needs to escape the massacre of children in Bethlehem.

Herod's role in Matthew's narrative confronts us with some difficult decisions. We know how Herod managed power and dealt with threats from a fear-based management style. Matthew asks us, how will we? We know how Herod used violence to get his way. Matthew asks us, will we?

As Brian McLaren writes, "Herod and Pharaoh before him model one way (to rule): violence is simply one more tool, used in varying degrees, to gain and maintain power. The baby that Herod seeks to kill will model another way. His tool will be service, not violence. And his goal will not be gaining and maintaining power, but rather using his power to heal and empower others. He will reveal a vision of God that is reflected more in the vulnerability of children than in the violence of men, more in the caring of mothers than in the cruelty of kings."

For me, Herod's war on Christmas also provokes some uncomfortable thoughts about God that I would rather side step. Does God ever promote or condone violence? Does God favor the sacrifice of children for the well being of adults? Does our understanding of God's will include the actions of powerful old men who permit the young and innocent to die to preserve their rule?

Do we envision God in the image of a helpless baby, frail but full of limitless promise? Do we really want to identify with a God who sides with victims and shares their vulnerability?

Sadly, Herods are still everywhere: Herods like Kim Jong-un in North Korea, Nicolas Maduro in Venezuela, Vladimir Putin in Russia, Bashar Al-Assad in Syria, Prince Mohammed bin Salman in Saudi Arabia, Omar Al-Bashir in Sudan. The list goes on and on.

Their style of leadership through fear and intimidation is every bit as strong today as it was 2000 years ago. Only in contrast with the Herods of the world can we grasp the radical nature of Jesus's leadership and authority.

By sending Jesus as a baby rather than as an adult, God turned Herod's power structure upside down and rejected the Herods, all those who have sought to rule by fear, intimidation, violence and bloodshed throughout history.

The birth of Jesus announces God's other way. For us, following Jesus means acknowledging at every turn the destructive reality of the violence around us. But following Jesus also means siding with the vulnerable in defiance of oppressors who see the vulnerable as expendable. To walk with Jesus is to withhold consent to and cooperation with the powerful and to invest it instead with the vulnerable. It is a refusal to bow to the Herods and their ruthless regimes so that we reserve our loyalty for a honorable king and a just kingdom.

During the Christmas season we profess that, yes, Jesus has truly come. But we must acknowledge that the dream for which he gave his life has not yet fully come to fruition. As long as the world's elites plot violence, as long as children pay the price, as long as mothers weep, we followers of Jesus cannot be satisfied and cannot remain silent.

The birth of Jesus in that lowly cattle shed was God's unequivocal "NO" to violence, fear, manipulation, bloodshed; an unmistakable "NO" to Herod and to the millions of men and women who have taken their leadership cues from him ever since.

God sent the infant Jesus, meek and mild, into Herod's brutal empire to confront the world's passive acceptance of fear and violence as tools of the powerful. That birth compels us to consider our own management of power within our relationships. That birth is God's way of asking, how will you deal with a vicious, violent world?

God has given us his answer, loud and clear, by redefining power in terms of love, compassion and service instead of cruelty, manipulation and fear.

And God is still waiting, holding his breath, for us to answer.