

Week 3 - Herod and the Homies - Matthew 2:1-23

Scripture Reading: Psalm 2:1-12

Introduction

So far, in this mini-series we've seen two positive accounts: Joseph and the magi.

But today we're going to change things up as we consider the other characters in Matthew's account of the birth and early childhood of Jesus.

Since he first arrived on our TV screens in 1966, this guy [Grinch] has been the poster boy for people lacking the Christmas spirit.

Dr. Seuss, the author of How the Grinch Stole Christmas, introduced the world to the Grinch in book form in 1957 as he described him as a sour, solitary creature with a heart "two sizes too small".

As the story unfolds, the Grinch, having been annoyed by his neighbors' joyous Christmas celebrations for years, tries to prevent this Christmas from coming by stealing all their gifts, the food for their feast, and even their Christmas tree.

Of course, the Grinch is unsuccessful in stopping Christmas and, by the end of the story, we see him reformed and joining in with his neighbors in celebration.

Dr. Seuss admitted that he modeled the Grinch on himself after seeing himself in the mirror one year on December 26.

At the time, he was upset by an illness his wife was enduring and bothered by the commercialization of Christmas and he admitted to feeling very "Grinch-ish," so he set out to examine his feelings by putting it all down in story form.

His later stated that his hope was to see if he could rediscover something about Christmas that he had obviously lost.

I think we can assume he was successful and his story of self-examination has become a Christmas classic.

However, Dr. Seuss wasn't the first person to feel "Grinch-ish" over Christmas and not every Grinch eventually sees the light.

I almost titled this morning's message "Herod: the original Grinch" but decided that he wasn't the only villain in Matthew's account so I changed my title to include the others as well.

This morning we are going to begin by looking at the cast of characters in Matthew's account and their reactions to the news that the Messiah had been born at long last in Bethlehem before seeing how God was at work in the background.

By the end, we are going to see that we each have a choice to make when it comes to Christmas.

Because, while Dr. Seuss wasn't the first Grinch he also wasn't the last, and the spirit of the Grinch is still alive and well today.

I. The cast of characters

The main character in our roll call of Grinches is **King Herod**.

Herod is a name we see often in the gospel accounts - my concordance lists 40 occurrences of the name - and one could easily come away with the wrong impression that all the mentions of the name refer to the same man.

However, Herod was a family name and there are six different Herods named in the New Testament.

But two of them aren't called Herod.

We have Herod Archelaus who is called simply "Archelaus" in Matthew 2:22 and Herod Philip is mentioned simply as "Philip" in Mark 6:17.

Herod Antipas was the one who ordered the murder of John the Baptist.

Herod Agrippa I had James, the brother of John and the first apostle to be martyred, put to death with the sword and Herod Agrippa II was the "Agrippa" who heard Paul's defense in Caesarea.

And they were all descendants of the Herod in our passage, the one known as Herod I or Herod the Great.

Herod was 25 years old in 41 B.C. when he was installed as governor of Galilee - a position he held for 37 years until he died in 4 B.C.

Rome found him to be a useful vassal king during his tenure as he successfully maintained the peace and kept the monetary tributes flowing to Rome.

Herod is also known for his amazing hand at creating public works including a theater, an amphitheater, and fortifications at Jerusalem as well as his reconstruction and expansion of the temple there.

Jewish historian Josephus records that the refurbished and enhanced temple exceeded the magnificence of Solomon's original temple.

However, Herod was a mixed bag and as great as his public works and general service may have been, he was equally great in wickedness.

He obviously knew men and how to use them to his advantage as demonstrated by his ability to win and maintain the warmest of friendship of the powers of Rome.

However, within his own orbit, his motto appears to have been the opposite of that of the Three Musketeers as his mindset seems to have been him against all and all against him.

To say that Herod was paranoid and ruthless is to say hardly anything at all.

History records how he murdered many of his own family members including his both his parents-in-law, his uncle, two of his sons, and his first wife, Miriamne because he suspected them of various plots against him.

In all, Herod had ten wives and twelve sons, although he did away with several of them for one reason or another.

Josephus records that when Herod knew he would soon die, he also knew that no one was going to mourn his passing.

Actually, it seems the Jews were preparing a general celebration to mark the occasion but, whether Herod knew that or not, I don't know.

But, he knew his time was short so he summoned his sister and instructed her to arrest all the Jewish leaders in the land and imprison them in the hippodrome just below the palace so that they could be executed at the moment of his death.

He wanted everyone to have something to cry about when he died.

His brutality seems only to have been matched by his vanity.

Of course, they wouldn't be mourning him but that must not have mattered to his twisted mind.

It's a relief to know that his wish wasn't carried out in that instance.

Still, his demonstrated character as a stone-cold killer was such that Caesar Augustus is said to have remarked, when hearing the news of the death of Herod's two sons, that it was safer to be Herod's hog than his son.

It's against that backdrop that we see the wise men arrive in Jerusalem and begin asking where they might find "he who has been born king of the Jews."

We'll consider his reaction to their arrival and inquiry in just a bit but first let's consider **the chief priests and scribes** who are also mentioned in the account.

These were the religious leaders of Judaism.

In those days, the high priest was appointed by the Romans so they were, in fact, political appointees who were more interested in serving the political powers than in serving God.

In this particular case, the chief priests were likely appointed by Herod himself so it's not difficult to imagine how thrilled they would be to be invited to give Herod spiritual advice.

We tend to think of the scribes as guys hunched over desks copying the Scriptures.

And while that was part of their function the scribes were also authorities who interpreted the Jewish law.

They were professional scholars and teachers of the law and primarily Pharisees.

What we need to understand is that this combined group knew exactly where the Messiah was prophesied to be born as their ready quotation from **Micah 5:2** indicates.

The last group mentioned is “**all Jerusalem**” which means the common people of the city.

These were the shopkeepers and men and women in the streets who the wise men would have naturally encountered as they rode into town and inquired of as they searched for the newborn king of the Jews.

We need to view the arrival of the wise men in context with what Scripture tells us had already transpired and what the people would have likely known.

In **Luke 1:10** we see that a “whole multitude of people” were outside the temple and witnessed the miracles surrounding Elizabeth’s pregnancy.

And in verse 57 [**Luke 1:57**] we see the neighbors of Zechariah and Elizabeth join with them in celebration of John’s birth.

Zechariah was a temple priest and all this was a big deal that would not have gone unnoticed and unremembered.

They also had the testimony of the shepherds who we’ll look at next week as they had spread the word that the Messiah had been born after being visited and alerted by the angel chorus.

Mary and Joseph had traveled to Jerusalem to present Jesus in the temple and, while a poor, young couple presenting an infant would not have been a big deal, certainly the Spirit-inspired proclamations of Simeon and Anna, would have been noticed.

After all, they had been fixtures in the temple for years.

So, the arrival of the wise men, with their news of a star and the birth of the king of the Jews wasn’t quite a surprise.

It was more of another confirmation of what the people had already heard and news they should have welcomed.

But as we see in our passage, the reactions of the three groups weren’t exactly positive.

II. The reactions

The first reaction was disquiet or unease.

The Greek word for troubled here literally means to shake back and forth, to be agitated and stirred up like boiling water.

Given what we know of Herod, just the thought of a rival king of the Jews would have been sufficient to agitate him.

The image of Herod quaking in his sandals brings to mind the description of Belshazzar in Daniel 5 when he saw a human hand appear out of thin air to write on the wall of his palace.

We’re told in **Daniel 5:6** that his color changed, his limbs gave way, and his knees knocked together as his imagination ran wild.

It’s only natural that Herod would call for those he thought could give him information regarding this new king so he could deal with things before they got out of hand.

What we miss in our English translation is that the verb “inquired” in verse 4 [**Matthew 2:4**] is in the imperfect tense indicating that Herod had to ask them repeatedly before they gave the right answer.

We might well wonder at the actions of the religious leaders.

They knew the prophecies and knew that the ruler who would shepherd God's people would come from Bethlehem.

They knew Zechariah's story, after all, he was one of them.

Do we really think Zechariah kept quiet about the whole baby in his wife's womb leaping at the arrival of Mary who was carrying Jesus?

They had to have known about Simeon and Anna and their public testimony and there's every reason to expect they heard the general buzz around town about Jesus' birth and the miracles surrounding it.

And yet they hadn't bothered to travel the five short miles south of Jerusalem to check things out.

We should expect they would have been the first to hustle down to Bethlehem when they got the first hint that the Messiah had finally arrived.

Of all people, they should have been eager for his arrival.

But for some reason they rejected him.

Maybe it was because they were looking for a conquering king and not a helpless baby or maybe it was because he hadn't been born into royalty and wasn't the kind of Messiah they preferred - we just don't know.

What we do know is that the religious leaders continued to reject Jesus even after he reached adulthood and began his earthly ministry, in part because he didn't seek their favor but chose the company of sinners.

Maybe their egos simply couldn't abide the fact that God first presented his Son to shepherds and not them.

Then we read that "all Jerusalem" was troubled right along with Herod.

And, as we saw last week, a large delegation of foreigners coming to town would cause a stir but this level of disquiet is said to be the same as Herod's - the common people by and large were upset by the news of the newborn king.

Some scholars say that the people were likely upset because they were fearful of Herod's reaction to the news.

In light of how we see Herod react later on in the account, they certainly had reason to fear his reaction but I don't think that was the true reason for their upset.

After all, Matthew uses the phrase "with him" which seems to better indicate they were troubled the same as Herod.

The mere news of his existence caused the general populace to be troubled.

It's quite interesting that Jesus who was still a baby at that point caused such a stir.

Perhaps the idea and anticipation of a coming, even imminent Messiah, was preferable to a sinful public than one who has arrived.

People who are content in their sin don't typically want someone around who reminds them of their depravity - it makes them uncomfortable.

Maybe enough time had passed since his birth and the initial buzz about it that they had allowed his presence to slip to the back of their minds and the arrival of the wise men stirred it up again.

That's just a theory and it's pure speculation but, regardless of the reason, the people were troubled by the wise men looking for Jesus right alongside Herod.

Even more disturbing, they appear to have been completely apathetic about Jesus' arrival before the wise men showed up.

I suppose it's not so different today.

The population of Jerusalem, like any town today, predominantly consisted of unbelievers and unbelievers are typically uninterested in Christ.

After all, Jewish unbelievers are no more prone to recognize Jesus and worship him than Gentile unbelievers.

Paul reveals as much in **Romans 3:9-11** where he writes:

What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, as it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God.

We tend to have a flawed picture of the people of Jesus' day and think that they were somehow more spiritual.

But being close to the truth doesn't save anyone and an unbeliever growing up in Jerusalem was no more inclined to recognize Jesus than an unbeliever today who grows up in a Christian home.

Since the fall of Genesis 3, our nature has been to live for ourselves.

We seek personal fulfillment, pleasure, escape from pain and hardship, but we don't seek God as God to make him our God.

Until God draws us to himself the attitude of an unbeliever tends to swing between apathy and hostility.

And, even if reluctantly, we have to accept that Herod at least took Jesus seriously as we see him react violently against him by murdering the innocents.

Having ascertained from the religious leaders where the Christ was to be born, Herod sought an audience with the wise men and instructed them to come back and report precisely where he could locate the child they were seeking.

Of course, he said he wanted to know so that he could also go and worship him personally - which was an obvious deception.

Herod was paranoid about his power and position and there was no way he was going to allow anyone to be called king of the Jews but himself - at least not as long as he was alive.

He had killed before on the mere suspicion that someone was trying to usurp his throne and he was perfectly willing to kill again and as many times as necessary to maintain his position.

But even Herod had to proceed with at least a little caution and moderation lest he call attention to himself in Rome by stirring up too much trouble.

And, if he could determine the exact address to go to his job of eliminating the child king would be much easier.

But Herod was shrewd and he knew that sometimes things don't go according to the first plan, so he began by asking the wise men for the precise time when the star had appeared.

That way, if the exact identity of the child he was seeking couldn't be determined, he would have an age range for the children he would have to kill in order to get his man, as it were.

It would be difficult to overstate the horror of the wholesale slaughter of the baby boys in and around Bethlehem.

In verse 16 we read how Herod, his Plan A thwarted, flew into a rage and instituted Plan B as he ordered all the male children who were two years old and under killed.

There are some who claim that such a slaughter would surely have been recorded in a secular record somewhere and cite the absence of such a record as proof that this massacre never happened.

However, absence of proof is never proof of absence and there are a couple of possible reasons record of it doesn't exist outside of Matthew's gospel.

First, such a record may have been made but not survived to present day.

Second, in spite of the horrific nature of the act, it might well have not been significant enough to merit recording - especially when one considers the act in light of all that Herod had done in his career.

Consider that historians say Bethlehem was a village of around 300 people at the time Herod and, even if you include the rural area surrounding Bethlehem up to say a mile, you might get to 500 or so people.

There are roughly 335 million people living in the United States today and less than 10 million of those people are male children below the age of 5.

Applying that ratio to Bethlehem and the surrounding area would mean that there would have been around 14 or 15 boys under age five and even fewer who were two and under.

So, even if we leave the figure at 15 innocent lives lost, there is a really good chance no one bothered to write it down in the secular record books simply because it wasn't considered particularly noteworthy.

After all, those were violent times and Herod had killed so many.

But God noted it and preserved the account in his Word as we see the deaths of the innocents likened to Judah being carried into captivity as Matthew quotes from **Jeremiah 31:15**.

III. But God...

We also see that God intervened once again as he sent an angel to Joseph in a dream to warn him and instruct him to take Mary and Jesus and flee to Egypt.

And Joseph once again demonstrated his obedience and faith in God as it appears he immediately rose from his bed, gathered his little family and headed out that very night.

We saw him obey with the same readiness in **Matthew 1:24** when the angel came to him with the message about Mary's pregnancy and he arose and took her into his home as his wife immediately.

The idea of fleeing to Egypt wouldn't have been as random to Joseph as it appears to us.

There happened to be a large Jewish community in Egypt where they could expect to find refuge and it was a relatively close Roman province outside of Herod's control.

So, it really wasn't all that strange that God would direct Joseph to take his family there.

We can't say for certain how long Joseph, Mary, and Jesus remained in Egypt - only that they didn't return until after Herod had died.

And history records that Herod died a horribly painful death that sounds a lot like kidney failure leading to complete renal collapse.

Ancient records indicate he suffered from "intense itching, painful intestinal problems, breathlessness, convulsions of every limb, and gangrene of the genitalia."

That sounds like a fitting death for such a monster and it's interesting to note that **Acts 12:23** records Herod's grandson dying a similar death.

They were quite the family.

Herod sought to snuff out the life of the infant King but instead he was used by God to fulfill four of the prophecies regarding his Son.

Matthew 2:6 fulfills the prophecy of Micah 5:2

Matthew 2:15 fulfills Hosea 11:1

Matthew 2:18 fulfills Jeremiah 31:15

Matthew 2:23 is different though.

Here we see that it's said to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophets in general with no specific prophecy quoted.

What we need to understand is that there are multiple ways of quoting Old Testament prophecy in the New Testament. There is literal prophecy and literal fulfillment as in Matthew 2:6.

Then there is literal prophecy and a typical fulfillment like we find in Matthew 2:15 where the prophecy spoke of Israel as a type that stood in for Jesus.

Third, there is literal prophecy with a different application as we find in Matthew 2:18 where there is a point of similarity but also many differences.

Then in Matthew 2:23 we see the fourth type where we have a summary of multiple prophetic words uttered by multiple prophets but not a single, specific prophecy.

And in this instance what is being referred to is the general idea that Jesus would be despised and rejected.

That's an idea that is found in many places in the Old Testament and testified to in **John 1:46** by Nathaniel when he asked if anything good could come from Nazareth.

The point we want to note this morning is that God was active and using people and human events to fulfill what he had determined long ago.

Herod only thought he was in charge like those we saw in our reading of Psalm 2 as he served as an unwitting tool to God's ends.

Conclusion

When I study the Bible, I'm continually struck by how little people have changed over the course of history.

Like the people of Jerusalem, most people today are indifferent to Jesus.

They may well have heard his name and even some facts about him but they don't care.

I've had a realization of late that I've shared with some of you that people today aren't so much rejecting Christ as they aren't even considering him.

For them, getting involved with Jesus would be like eating a bowl of ketchup for breakfast.

They aren't exactly rejecting it because it's not even on the menu.

Others are like the religious leaders who have actually studied the Bible and know a great deal about Jesus but they have rejected him.

Either they don't believe they need a savior or he isn't the kind of Savior they prefer but they have made a conscious choice to go another way.

Then there are those who follow after the example of Herod as they are openly hostile to the very idea of the Savior.

Many people today are offended by the mere mention of his name and, if they had their way, every trace of Jesus would be erased.

We see this all around us in our institutions where even mentioning the name of Jesus is forbidden.

But there are still those who follow in the footsteps of the wise men with a heart to worship the King.

It's ironic that it's the pagans who recognize Jesus for who he really is and willingly, readily bow down to him.

Herod tried to kill him, the religious leaders tried to ignore him, and the people couldn't be bothered with him.

But the magi sought him when the Father alerted them and they traveled at great expense not resting or being deterred until they were able to fall down in worship of him.

Hostility, rejection, indifference, or worship - those are still the only options available at this Christmas season some 2,000 years later.

Let's pray.

Psalm 2:1-12 (page 448)

Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain?

The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against his Anointed, saying, "Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us."

He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision.

Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying, "As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill."

I will tell of the decree: The Lord said to me, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you.

Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession.

You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel."

Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth.

Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling.

Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled.

Blessed are all who take refuge in him.