

THE WORSHIP LIFE OF HEROD THE KING

Matthew 2:1-12

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on January 6, 2019, the Epiphany of the Lord, at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia.

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.'

When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

*"And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel." '*

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.'

When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Prayer: "Lord God, may the words of St. Matthew, the words of W. H. Auden, and the words I offer give you glory today, and draw you a bit nearer to our lives and our world. Amen.

Nearly every year during Advent or Christmas, I pull down from my shelf a yellowed, 1970s copy of W. H. Auden's "For the Time Being." It is a long, narrative poem that the British-American wrote during the height of World War II and that he labels "A Christmas Oratorio." I saw a dramatic reading of it in seminary and have been drawn back to it ever since. Like any good literature, the language is at times difficult to follow. Many of the scenes are heavy with angst and anxiety, but the reading is nearly always redemptive and hopeful.

This year, as I knew I would be preaching on "the wise men" or "Magi," I was drawn to give attention not to the familiar "three kings" who make the story so colorful and appealing, but rather to Herod the King who was "startled" when he heard from the Magi that they had followed a star to his city of Jerusalem because a child "who had been born [there was] King of the Jews" and because they wanted to worship him, to "pay him homage."

Now it is understandable that no ruler whose job description includes being "King of the Jews" wants to entertain the possibility that a child born on real estate within his royal territory can rightly make the same claim. Predictably, Herod's reaction to the Magi is immediate and intense.

- He tries to trick them into telling him the exact location of the child so that he may pay the child homage as well.
- But the worship life of Herod the King involves anything other than paying homage to *this* child, for Herod’s real intention is to determine the child’s location so he can take steps necessary to eliminate the child.
- Thus, when the Magi fail to return and share the child’s location with Herod, he orders the death of “all the children in and around Bethlehem...two years old or under.”¹

In giving this deadly command, Herod follows in the footsteps of his ancestor Pharaoh who had sought to eliminate Moses by ordering all male children thrown into the Nile;² and he foreshadows all those rulers down to the present day who allow children to be displaced by war, ethnic cleansing, political fighting; who allow children to be sold into slavery or prostitution; who allow children to face disease, starvation, or execution in service to the ruler’s goals. We have seen such Herods in our day and time. We know they continue to rule.

I.

In many ways Herod the Great need not have felt much threat from the birth of a child among a minority community within his kingdom.

According to the historian Josephus, by the time the Magi arrived, Herod had governed effectively for over three decades.³

- Installed by the Romans, Herod knew the importance of having good relationships with the Jews within his kingdom. He granted them a measure of freedom and renovated their Temple following its desecration several decades earlier.
- Herod also strengthened the more Roman (or Hellenistic) aspects of the kingdom, founding cities, building stadiums, gymnasiums, theatres, roads, walls, temples, halls, porticoes, marketplaces, aqueducts, fountains, colonnades – all in the grandly severe Roman style.

While Herod’s rule was not without the kind of brutality common among leaders of his day (including the killing of members of his own family), Herod’s reign was *effective*. He earned the title “Herod the Great” through both his *numerous accomplishments* and his *ruthless power*.

II.

Let’s turn now see how Auden presents Herod to us, specifically at the time the Wise Men visit.

Auden introduces us to Herod by depicting the king *ruminating on the good fortune* that has led to his successful life, a rumination into which many of us at Westminster, in Alexander and Arlington could enter.

To Fortune—that I have become Tetrarch, that I have escaped assassination, that at sixty my head is clear and my digestion sound.

¹ Matthew 2:16-18.

² Exodus 1:15-22.

³These are drawn from Josephus’ *Jewish War*, excerpts of which are found in C. K. Barrett *The New Testament Background: Selected Documents* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1961), 118-122, See also Robert A Spivey, D. Moody Smith, C. Clifton Black, *Anatomy of the New Testament: Sixth Edition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 17.

To my Father—for the means to gratify my love of travel and study....
To my Mother—for a straight nose.
To Eva—my...[nurse]—for regular habits.
To my brother, Sandy, who married a trapeze-artist and died of drink—for so refuting the position of the Hedonists....
To Professor Lighthouse—for his lectures on The Peloponnesian War...
To my secretary, Miss Button—for admitting that my speeches were inaudible.

Auden then shows how Herod used the privileges he *inherited* for the *public* good.

There is no visible disorder [Herod says].
No crime...
Barges are unloading soil fertilizer at the river wharves.
Soft drinks and sandwiches may be had in the inns at reasonable prices.
Allotment gardening has become popular.
The ...truck-drivers no longer carry guns....
It is a long time since anyone stole the park benches or murdered the swans.
There are children in the province who have never seen a louse, shopkeepers who have never handled a counterfeit coin, women of forty who have never hidden in a ditch except for fun.
Yes [Herod says], in twenty years I've managed to do a little....darkness has been pushed back a few inches....

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Yet Herod's sense of progress and control does not lead him to complacency. He remains on guard against forces that he considers to be *superstitious* and therefore *disruptive*. He brags:

...inside this little civilized patch...it has been made *unnecessary* for anyone over the age of twelve to believe in fairies...[or angels or witches or warlocks or goblins or devils...or God].

Yet Herod senses that superstition might *once again* be on the rise. He mocked the prayers he imagined his subjects lifting up to God:

Leave Thy heavens [O God] and come down to *our* earth... Become our uncle. Look after Baby, amuse Grandfather, escort Madam to the Opera, help Wily with his homework, and introduce Muriel to a handsome naval officer....

When the Magi show up at Herod's door and he notices "an ecstatic grin on their scholarly faces," he knows the forces of superstition are not far behind.

Why couldn't this wretched infant be born *somewhere else*? [He asks.]
Why can't people be *sensible*?...
Why can't they see that the notion of a *finite* God is *absurd*?

Herod then exercises executive privilege with *decisiveness*. He orders the Massacre of Innocents. "Civilization must be saved," he says, "even if this means sending for the military..."

III.

As we know from Matthew and subsequent history, the Slaughter of the Innocents brings tears to parents ancestral and contemporary:

A voice was heard in Ramah,
Wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
She refused to be consoled,
Because they are no more.⁴

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But Joseph and Mary are spared at least the *imminent* death of their child, for they have been warned a dream to flee to Egypt, which they do; and then, once Herod has died, which happens soon thereafter, they are told in *another* dream to return home to Israel, which they also do.

As intensely as Herod tries, as powerful and effective as he is, the birth of the Messiah – the birth of Jesus Christ – is one light Herod *cannot* extinguish, one star he cannot prevent from *shining* and attracting *followers*. Herod's words and actions are cruel. They are destructive. They are deadly. But they are *not* final. As an angel of the Lord puts it eloquently to Joseph:

Get up,
Take the child and his mother,
And go to the land of Israel,
For those who were seeking the child's life are dead.⁵

The power of Herod the Great proves *not* to be ultimate.

IV.

As the narrative draws to a close and Auden switches from poetry to prose, he speaks of the *limited* and *provisional* nature of all earthly kingdoms:

...Powers and Times are not gods [he wrote]...
For all societies and epochs are *transient details*...

But such belief does not lead Auden to withdraw from “the transient details” of “societies and epochs” into a private, spiritual cocoon, removed from the affairs of the world. He writes that while “Powers and Times” are “not gods,” they are “mortal *gifts* from God;” and as such they

[Transmit] an everlasting *opportunity*
That the Kingdom of Heaven may come, not in our *present*
And not in our *future*, but in *the Fullness of Time*.

Through the birth of the Messiah, Auden calls us to live “for the time being” *within* our earthly kingdoms.

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⁴ Matthew 2:18.

⁵ Matthew 2:20.

In a famous conclusion to the work, Auden brings us back into the present:

Well, so that is that. Now we must dismantle the tree,
Putting the decorations back into their cardboard boxes—
...carrying them up to the attic.

...for the time being, here we all are,
Back in the moderate Aristotelian city
Of darning and the Eight-Fifteen, where Euclid's geometry
And Newton's mechanics would account for our experience,
And the kitchen table exists because I scrub it....

There are bills to be paid, machines to keep in repair,
Irregular verbs to learn, the Time Being to redeem
From insignificance.

In the Time Being in which we live, the Herods of the world often *rule* but do *not* ultimately *prevail*. Auden calls us to believe in the child whose birth drew the Magi to Jerusalem, to cast our lots with this King, with his rule, his reign. Of this child, Auden writes:

He is the Way.
Follow Him through the Land of Unlikeness;
You will see rare beasts, and have unique adventures.

He is the Truth.
Seek Him in the Kingdom of Anxiety;
You will come to a great city that has expected your return for years.

He is the Life.
Love Him in the World of the Flesh;
And at your marriage all its occasions shall dance for joy.

The Child Herod could not snuff out continues to live, continues to lead us to put up and take down our Christmas decorations. This Child continues to lead us to scrub the kitchen table and learn irregular verbs. He continues to bring us together, to this place of worship, to Westminster, Sunday after Sunday, weekday after weekday. This Holy Child continues to instill within us hope, sometimes faint and halting, sometimes overwhelming, sometimes even "hope against hope," but still hope.

It is not Herod who lives. The Child who lives is the One over whose birth the star settles, the One whose birth draws Magi from their precincts of learning and shepherds from their fields of labor. Rulers cruel and humane come and go. "Societies and Epochs are transient details." It is Christ who lives, not Herod, not the Herods of the world, not even the Herods of the world thought by themselves or others to be great. Amen.