

Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles

Epiphany Sunday – January 8, 2017

Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister

Matthew 2:1-12

For Reflection

"You gain strength, courage, and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You are able to say to yourself, 'I lived through this horror. I can take the next thing that comes along.'"

- Eleanor Roosevelt (1884-1962)

"Fear keeps us focused on the past or worried about the future. If we can acknowledge our fear, we can realize that right now we are okay. Right now, today, we are still alive, and our bodies are working marvelously. Our eyes can still see the beautiful sky. Our ears can still hear the voices of our loved ones."

- Thich Nhat Hanh, Vietnamese Buddhist Priest, b.1926

Herod, The Pedophobe

I want to talk about Herod – King Herod – the guy that Matthew describes as a pedophobe (one who fears children) and a murderer (beyond just the massacre of the children of Bethlehem).

Herod – who was this guy anyway?

Herod was born around 73 BCE. That means he was in his late 60's, early 70's when Jesus was born.

Herod's father was an Edomite [Arab] whose ancestors had converted to Judaism. Herod was raised as a Jew

While Herod publicly identified himself as a Jew...this was undermined by [his] decadent lifestyle – [abhorrent to] observant Jews.

[His father] appointed him governor of Galilee in 47 BCE, when Herod was about **25 -28 years old**. He was granted the title of "**King of Judea**" by the Roman Senate, as such he was a vassal of the Roman Empire, expected to support the interests of his Roman patrons.

As for his character:

Modern scholars agree Herod suffered throughout his lifetime from depression and paranoia... Herod enacted...[numerous] security measures aimed at suppressing the contempt his people, especially Jews, had towards him...It has been suggested that Herod used secret police to monitor and report the feelings of the general populace towards him. He

sought to prohibit protests, and had opponents removed by force. He had a bodyguard of 2,000 soldiers. [The historian] Josephus describes various units of Herod's personal guard taking part in Herod's funeral, including the Doryphnoroï, and a Thracian, Celtic (probably Gallic) and Germanic contingent. The Doryphnoroï ...was probably composed of distinguished veteran soldiers and **young men from the most influential Jewish families.**

Herod [at various times] executed several members of his own family, including his second wife Mariamne I [and two of his numerous sons].

Josephus writes that Herod had **great passion and also great jealousy** concerning his wife, Mariamne I. [In] 29 BCE she learned of Herod's plans to murder her, and stopped sleeping with him. Herod put her on trial on a charge of adultery. His sister, Salome I, was chief witness against her. **Mariamne's mother Alexandra** made an appearance and incriminated her own daughter. Historians say her mother was next on Herod's list to be executed and did this only to save her own life. Mariamne was executed, and **Alexandra declared herself Queen, stating that Herod was mentally unfit to serve.** Josephus wrote that this was Alexandra's strategic mistake; Herod executed her without trial.

After murdering Mariamne, Herod became polygamous. I suppose that if you have multiple wives, no one wife has control over one's feelings and fortunes. There is also a benefit to diversifying and lowering the general status of the female population of one's household.

The man was a builder:

He spent lavish sums on his various building projects...and his buildings were very large, ambitious projects. Herod was responsible for the **construction of the Temple Mount, a portion of which remains today as the Western Wall.** ...He...used the latest technology in hydraulic cement and underwater construction to build the harbor at Caesarea.

While Herod's zeal for building transformed Judea, his motives were not selfless. **He built fortresses** (Masada, Herodium, Alexandrium, Hyrcania, and Machaerus) that **he and his family could go to in case of insurrection...all these vast projects were aimed at gaining the support of the Jews and improving his reputation as a leader.**

...In order to fund these expenses, Herod utilized a Hasmonean taxation system that weighed heavily on the Judean people. Despite the economic burden placed by Herod's building projects...these enterprises also brought employment and opportunities for the people's provision. In some instances, Herod took it upon himself to provide for his people during times of need, such as during a severe famine that occurred in 25 BCE.

...at the end of Herod's reign, anger and dissatisfaction were common amongst Jews. Heavy outbreaks of violence and riots followed Herod's death in many cities, including Jerusalem, as all the built-up grievances against him were unleashed. The momentum from these revolts led to an increased demand for Jewish freedom from Roman rule. Herod's leadership caused enough anger for it to become a prime cause of the Great Revolt of 70 C.E.

As for the Massacre of the Innocents – this event is recorded only once – in the Gospel of Matthew.

...no other contemporary source refers to the massacre. One reason that has been put forward for the lack of other sources for the alleged massacre is that Bethlehem was a small village, and thus **the number of male children under the age of two might not have exceeded 20.**

The killing of so FEW children may have not made historic news. However, biographers of Herod have stated that such a command from King Herod would have been:

... "wholly in keeping with all that we know of him."

HE was the KING OF THE JEWS and any possible usurper would have been taken out.

Herod died in the Spring of year 4 C.E. which may have cleared the way for the child Jesus and his family to return to Galilee from Egypt.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herod_the_Great

So this is our guy, Herod the Great, Herod the Pedophobe, Herod the Hypocritical, Herod the Paranoid, Herod the King. The words in our text that caught my attention this time were in verse three. The wise ones come to him looking for the newborn "king of the Jews."

3 When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him...

He was frightened. Afraid of a baby. His fear had to do with the potential loss of power and influence – it was a challenge to his authority. And, being the person he was, he was not going to wait around and let that challenge grow up. And why was all of Jerusalem also frightened? Because they knew what this would do to Herod and what he would do in response. And I'm guessing that once they knew just the babies in Bethlehem were the targets, they settled down and went back to a calmer state of alert normalcy.

It is the fear of Jerusalem that we need to focus on at this point. Fear as an emotional response to danger is actually a gift. It is a warning system that engages our survival mechanisms – moves us to action and, hopefully, out of harm's way. I use fear as a tool – especially at night when out in public places. Ignoring fear can be fatal.

On the other hand, fear can be a handicap. If fear causes us to freeze – unless we are chameleons blending into the landscape and avoiding a predator’s gaze – freezing is detrimental to our health and the health of others. If fear is a constant condition – it loses its effectiveness. My brain chemistry is such that it makes enough Serotonin – but sucks it up too quickly – so I am left with a constant state of anxiety. Many of my decisions during the first half of my life were in response to fear rather than choosing positive options. A Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitor (SRI) radically changed my decision-making process.

Populations that freeze when certain individuals or portions of the population are threatened – are not only useless in the face of a tyrant – but setting themselves up to be the next target. Populations, like individuals, need a giant SRI in order to function in the presence of a predator like Herod or the lurker in the parking lot. So what are some SRIs we can apply to our communities?

Remembering is an essential one. George Santayana, Spanish/Italian Philosopher (1863-1952) who died soon after WWII coined the phrase, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

And Jesus, this guy we profess to follow, gave us a ritual of remembrance that we practice to this day...which tells me that remembering is at the core of the life of faith as a Christian. Jesus did a lot of quoting of Hebrew and Jewish history along with his contemporary storytelling. He reminded people that the ancient texts had something to teach us – warnings as well as wisdom.

And if we take the time to remember Jesus in context, we keep in mind his behavior under Roman Occupation, his response to tyrants and economic oppression. We remember his compassion for the most vulnerable – for those being targeted for murder or incarceration or exclusion – and we recall his challenge to those who would hoard resources rather than share them.

And another essential SRI for our time is the **power of the Many**. Many voices, many bodies gathered in protest or support, many votes, many challenges to the choices of the powerful – the Many can effect positive change. The Many, in an organized, non-violent fashion, stopped the closure of the independent oversight of the Ethics of Congress. The Many are in the process of stopping the repeal of the Affordable Care Act. The Many can and will protect everyone from the worst the rich and powerful can dish out.

What are some other antidotes to paralyzing fear that you can think of?

We are rich with strategies. We are a hopeful, faithful people. Thanks be to G-d.

Matthew 2:1-12

1 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem. 2 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." 3 When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; 4 and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5 They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 6 '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.'"

7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8 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." 9 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. 10 When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 11 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. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Fear of the New: Neophobia
Fear of Babies: Pedophobia

Fear of children - Wikipedia

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fear_of_children

Fear of children, fear of infants or fear of childhood is alternatively called pedophobia (American English), paedophobia or pediaphobia. Other age-focused fears are ephebiphobia and gerontophobia. Recognised outcomes of pedophobia include paternalism, adultism, and by extension, ageism.

The Romans appointed King Herod as King of Judea in 37 BC. Historians agree that in many respects Herod had a hugely successful reign. King Herod, ethnically Arab but a practicing Jew, increased the land he governed from Palestine to parts of modern Jordan, Lebanon and Syria constructing fortresses, aqueducts and amphitheatres and earned him the title 'Herodes Magnus', Herod the Great.

The Romans also gave Herod the title 'King of the Jews' because of the Jewish population he ruled. The title of 'King of the Jews' begins to explain the impression we have of Herod from the Bible. The Bible shapes the popular conception we now have of Herod as a King who was proud of his title and would do anything to keep it.

The massacre of the innocents: If the soothsayers of the time were correct, the birth of a new King of the Jews was imminent and threatened Herod's position. In the massacre of newborn babies of Bethlehem found in the Nativity story, King Herod is portrayed as a tyrant prepared to kill infants who could eventually challenge him.

However, the historical evidence for the event is only Biblical and in fact only one verse in Matthew mentions it. The event is notably absent from the other gospels.

A verse from the Bible recounting the story of Herod's massacre of the newborns Matthew 2:16 tells the story © It seems difficult to imagine such a massacre was not mentioned by Josephus, a first-century historian who described other events in Herod's life. One could be a sceptical of Matthew's account of a massacre of infants.

In fact, demographic clues from first century Palestine reveal that Bethlehem was a small village, with a population between three hundred and a thousand. Experts estimate that, at any given time, the number of babies under the age of two would be only between seven and twenty. So numbers alone may be the reason why Josephus does not mention the murders.

Then Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceeding wrath, and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently inquired of the wise men. - Matthew 2:16

Herod's downfall: Many historians think that Herod's downfall began with his possessive love for his wife Mariamme. On a political expedition he visited the Roman ruler Octavian in Rhodes and feared for his life (he had previously sided with the defeated Marc Antony). He demanded that Mariamme be killed if he doesn't return alive, unable to bear the thought of another man with her.

Later, Herod became convinced by his sister that Mariamme was scheming against him. He had her put on trial and executed. Despite being responsible for her death, Herod's torment was intolerable. He saw visions of Mariamme. Perhaps in a futile attempt to replace his love for Mariamme, Herod became polygamous. The story of Herod became more tragic still when, for fear of being usurped, he executed three of his sons.

Herod's life was one of ruthless political expediency; although the historical evidence for the massacre of infants is exclusively Biblical it appears entirely possible that King Herod was capable of the atrocity.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/history/herod.shtml>

It is generally accepted that Herod was born around 73 BCE

Herod's father was by descent an Edomite whose ancestors had converted to Judaism. Herod was raised as a Jew

A loyal supporter of Hyrcanus II, Antipater appointed his son governor of Galilee in 47 BCE, when Herod was either about 25 or 28 years old.[17] His elder brother, Phasaël, was appointed governor of Jerusalem. Herod enjoyed the backing of Rome, but his brutality was condemned by the Sanhedrin.[18]

As Herod's family were converts to Judaism, his religious commitment was questioned by some elements of Jewish society.[22] When John Hyrcanus conquered the region of Idumaea (the Edom of the Hebrew Bible) in 140–130 BCE, he required all Idumaeans to obey Jewish law or to leave; most Idumaeans thus converted to Judaism, which meant that they had to be circumcised,[23] and many had intermarried with the Jews and adopted their customs.[24] While Herod publicly identified himself as a Jew and was considered as such by some,[25] this religious identification was undermined by the decadent lifestyle of the Herodians, which would have earned them the antipathy of observant Jews.[26]

Herod later executed several members of his own family, including his wife Mariamne I.[16]

Herod was granted the title of "King of Judea" by the Roman Senate,[27] as such he was a vassal of the Roman Empire, expected to support the interests of his Roman patrons

Herod's despotic rule has been demonstrated by many of his security measures aimed at suppressing the contempt his people, especially Jews, had towards him. For instance, it has been suggested that Herod used secret police to monitor and report the feelings of the general populace towards him. He sought to prohibit protests, and had opponents removed by force.[29] He had a bodyguard of 2,000 soldiers.[30] Josephus describes various units of Herod's personal guard taking part in Herod's funeral, including the Doryphnoroï, and a Thracian, Celtic (probably Gallic) and Germanic contingent.[30] While the term Doryphnoroï does not have an ethnic connotation, the unit was probably composed of distinguished veteran soldiers and young men from the most influential Jewish families.[30]

Herod spent lavish sums on his various building projects and generous gifts to other kingdoms, including Rome. His buildings were very large, ambitious projects. Herod was responsible for the construction of the Temple Mount, a portion of which remains today as the Western Wall. In addition, Herod also used the latest technology in hydraulic cement and underwater construction to build the harbor at Caesarea.[28] While Herod's zeal for building transformed Judea, his motives were not selfless. Although, he did build fortresses (Masada, Herodium, Alexandrium, Hyrcania, and Machaerus) that he and his family could go to in case of insurrection, all these vast projects were aimed at gaining the support of the Jews and improving his reputation as a leader.[31] While gaining the support for the Jews, Herod also built Sebaste and other pagan cities because he wanted to appeal to the country's substantial pagan population as well as the Jews.[28] However, in order to fund these expenses, Herod utilized a Hasmonean taxation system that weighed heavily on the Judean people. Despite the economic burden placed by Herod's building projects and gifts, these enterprises also brought employment and opportunities for the people's provision.[32] In some instances, Herod took it upon himself to provide for his people during times of need, such as during a severe famine that occurred in 25 BCE.[33]

...at the end of Herod's reign, anger and dissatisfaction were common amongst Jews. Heavy outbreaks of violence and riots followed Herod's death in many cities, including Jerusalem, as all the built-up grievances against him were unleashed. The momentum from these revolts led to an increased demand for Jewish freedom from Roman rule. Herod's leadership caused enough anger for it to become a prime cause of the Great Revolt of 70 C.E.[31]

Regarding the Massacre of the Innocents, although Herod was guilty of many brutal acts including the killing of his wife and two of his sons, no other contemporary source refers to the massacre.[38] One reason that has been put forward for the lack of other sources for the alleged massacre is that Bethlehem was a small village, and thus the number of male children under the age of two might not have exceeded 20.[39] Of recent biographers of Herod, most doubt the event took place,[40] with one exception, Stewart Perowne, who deems the killing "wholly in keeping with all that we know of him." [41] Other scholars such as Jack Finegan,[42] A. Schalit,[43] and Richard T. France[44] support the historicity of the event, or at least state there is nothing impossible about this command from Herod.[45]

29 BCE – Josephus writes that Herod had great passion and also great jealousy concerning his wife, Mariamne I. She learns of Herod's plans to murder her, and stops sleeping with him. Herod puts her on trial on a charge of adultery. His sister, Salome I, was chief witness against her. Mariamne I's mother Alexandra made an appearance and incriminated her own daughter. Historians say her mother was next on Herod's list to be executed and did this only to save her own life. Mariamne was executed, and Alexandra declared herself Queen, stating that Herod was mentally unfit to serve. Josephus wrote that this was Alexandra's strategic mistake; Herod executed her without trial.

Modern scholars agree Herod suffered throughout his lifetime from depression and paranoia.[65]

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