

The Christmas Story: A Story of Revolution: *Matthew 2*

Plymouth Park, December 16, 2007, Advent 3, Year A

Next week, our choir will lead us in our annual Christmas worship, singing some of our favorite Christmas carols. I was thinking this week about Christmas carols, and it's pretty amazing, isn't it, that these carols are so mainstream. When else in the year can you hear church songs, songs about Jesus played in the mall or at Wal-Mart? Sure, they play songs about Rudolph, Frosty, and Santa, but Jesus' is there too, he's always there, away in a manger, in the little town of Bethlehem, born on Christmas day.

If you browse the music section down the street at Target, you will see Christmas albums recorded by some of the most secular of artists. Their last album was all about things that normally are not considered Christian themes, but this album...this album's about Jesus being born.

Am I the only one who finds this odd?

Then there's the whole issue of the separation of Church and State. How many cities and states will put out governmentally funded nativity scenes this year? My hometown does this every year. Right in the center of town, at one of the busiest intersections, the City of Niceville has Santa and Mrs. Claus, with robotic arms so they can wave to all the passerbyers, and just below the Clauses is Mary and Joseph, the shepherds, the Magi, the farm animals and baby Jesus, posing for the nativity scene.

I don't think the city would be allowed to put up a crucifixion scene on Good Friday, or an empty tomb on Easter Sunday. But for Christmas, a nativity scene is all right.

Am I the only one who finds this odd?

This year network TV will interrupt their regularly scheduled time slots normally filled with programming not always favorable towards the story of Jesus, and they will put in it's place Christmas specials, specials with celebrities singing songs about Jesus, or that holiday favorite, *It's Christmas, Charlie Brown!*, where Linus reads to millions of viewers each year the Christmas story as told by Luke.

Why is this? What is it about the Christmas story that makes everyone stop and pay attention to Jesus, regardless of their religious affiliation?

The answer is simple, really. They stop; they pay attention, because the Christmas story is a really good story. It's a great story: a newborn baby boy, attended by angels, shepherds, and his young mother and father.

The Christmas story inspires what is best within us. It fills us with hope that though things may not be as we wish they were right now, they will get better.

The Christmas story makes even the hardest of hearts melt. For instance, Charles Dicken's *The Christmas Carol*. This story has captured the message of hope found in the Christmas story. Perhaps you became acquainted with the story through the Mickey Mouse version, or the Muppet's one or the one with Bill Murray. Whatever version you prefer, they all share the same storyline of hope.

It's the story of Scrooge and Crachet; Scrooge who will do anything to make a buck and to keep the bucks he already has, and Crachet, abused and taken advantage of by Scrooge as he tries his hardest to provide for his family. It doesn't take long for us to despise Ebenezer Scrooge, for he is a horrible, heartless man. And poor old Crachet, caught under the oppressive rule of a man too rich for his own good.

When the ghosts of Christmas appear in his bedchamber, we half hope they are the very angels of death, coming to drag Scrooge away to an eternity of retribution that we're all praying he receives.

But that's not what happens. That can't be the story. After all, this is Christmas. And the ghosts come to show Scrooge the way. This heartless, selfish, evil, oppressive, Herod-like Scrooge is given a second chance, a chance that he grabs a hold of. Scrooge repents, makes amends to those he oppressed, and lives happily ever after.

Now that's a Christmas story! A story of hope for the hopeless. Our world loves the story of Christmas, because the Christmas story is a story of hope and love and joy, a story of the impossible becoming possible, a story that can melt even the hardest of hearts.

That is, unless you're Herod. As Marti read in our text this morning, for some reason, when Herod hears the news of the newborn king, he doesn't break out into a chorus of O Come Let Us Adore Him. Herod is not someone we normally talk about at Christmas time. We are eager to add the Three Wise Men into our nativity scenes, but there is never a mention of Herod.

That's because Herod represents all that is wrong with our world. He's the opposite of Christmas spirit, and such sentiments are better left out of our Christmas celebrations.

Herod has been called, "Ebenezer Scrooge without the conversion, the Grinch without the change of heart."

Herod's reign was characterized by oppression. Though he was the king of the Jews, he was by no means a good king. He often peddled to the Roman Empire,

sucking up to them so that they would keep him in power. He would build temples and statues—even whole cities—in honor of the Roman Empire, paying for these lavish expenses through oppressive taxes and slave labor from his own people.

About Herod's rule, the ancient Hebrew historian Josephus writes:

No meeting of the people was permitted, nor were walking together ... and all their movements were observed. Those who were caught were punished severely, and many were taken, either openly or secretly, ... and put to death. Both in the city and in the open roads there were men who spied upon those who met together. ... Those who obstinately refused to go along with his practices he persecuted in all kinds of ways. As for the rest of the populace, he demanded that they submit to taking a loyalty oath ... that they would maintain a friendly attitude to his rule. Now most people yielded to his demand out of complaisance or fear, but those who showed some spirit and objected to compulsion he got rid of by every possible means.

This is Herod, the King of the Jews, the original antagonist of the Christmas story. He is a wicked king, a king who sees his citizens as merely tools to keep him in power.

When the wise men show up, looking for the promised king of the Jews. Herod's ears perk up. "What is this you say about the king of the Jews?"

When Herod hears the news about the newborn king of the Jews, the Messiah promised by the prophets, he's already decided what he's going to do. He's going to find this baby and kill him. The story could very well be false, there could be no newborn king in Bethlehem, but Herod wasn't a man who took risks. He ruled with an iron fist, and if anyone threatened his power, he took out the threat as quickly as possible.

So Herod decided to use these wise men as investigators. He sends them to Bethlehem with his birthday greetings for the baby king of the Jews, asking them to return to Jerusalem when they find their newborn king. But the wise men are wiser than that, knowing full well what Herod will do if he gets his hands on a supposed threat to his power. This is the last Herod sees of these wise men.

Realizing that the wise men have betrayed his wishes, Herod orders the massacre of all baby boys in Bethlehem, hoping that by killing the many he will kill the one who threatens his power.

Herod is nothing but evil. He is a petty king, threatened by a little baby, willing to kill thousands of baby boys in order to protect his power. But there's something about Herod we don't acknowledge. We have to give him a little credit.

For while we complain about people in the world not understanding the true meaning of Christmas, Herod gets it. Herod understands the true meaning of Christmas, and we would do well to listen to what Herod has to tell us about Christmas this morning.

Christmas according to Herod is not a feel good story with a happy ending. Christmas for Herod is the story of the end of his wicked reign, the story of political revolution.

From the very start, while he was still in diapers, Jesus was a threat to the powers of this world. Herod realizes what the birth of God in the flesh means for someone like him. If Jesus is king of the Jews, that means Herod is not.

Today everyone, Christian and non-Christian alike celebrate the birth of Jesus, yet if we knew what Herod knew, governments wouldn't be putting up nativity scenes, corporations wouldn't be sending out their annual Christmas nativity scene cards. If we knew what Herod knew, we wouldn't be that quick to celebrate.

For while Christmas is a story that melts our hearts, a story that gives us hope and fills us with cheer—for the powers of this world, Christmas is a story of revolution.

Herod reminds us that, contrary to our Christmas cards and carols, Jesus didn't enter the world in the midst of a holiday season of warm Christmas cheer. He was born in poverty, homeless, to a scared teenage mother and a confused father, under the rule of a wicked local king, and an oppressive empire.

And it is because of this that Jesus can be the original revolutionary, the savior of the outcasts and oppressed, for he was oppressed and an outcast himself. That is why Jesus can rise up and declare the powers of this world to be null and void—for he is the true king and he's ushering in a new kingdom.

Jesus' birth is no less than revolutionary, and Herod gets it. The news of the possible birth of the promised Messiah is enough to scare Herod into doing the impossible—killing thousands of helpless, innocent baby boys.

We don't like to tell this part of the Christmas story. It's too violent for the children. Speaking of Herod in the midst of Jesus and Santa...this spoils the mood. O Little Town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie! This song is a lie. When Jesus came into the world, Bethlehem was anything but lying still. Bethlehem was crying out in pain, for Herod's henchmen had slaughtered their baby boys and Rachel was weeping for her children.

No, no, we don't like to tell this part of the story. The Christmas story isn't a story about suffering and death...the Christmas story is one of hope. Yet if we are to have any hope this Christmas...this is the story we must tell!

Our world needs to hear this version of the Christmas story. Our world needs the church to put Herod back in Christmas.

For all around us, the powers of this world are oppressing the weak. Herods are springing up everywhere, willing to do whatever it takes to keep in power.

Throughout Africa, in Uganda and Sudan and Congo, millions have been slaughtered, all in the name of political power games. Throughout the Middle East, the poor suffer while the rich hide away in their palaces and children are caught in the midst of the wars of adults.

In our own country, the gap between the rich and the poor grows every year, while the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Worldwide corporations, some headquarters right here in Irving, control the bulk of the global income, making their presidents and vice-presidents and shareholders rich, while people around the world die of diseases that could easily be cured if they had the same basic medications we let expire in our own cabinets.

And in the midst of such exploitation of wealth and abuse of power, the church sits and says nothing. In fact, we participate in the problem, building our lavish buildings, hoarding our own resources, trying to promote our name and legacy as a church in the community, while forgetting about the name Emmanuel, which beckons us to be God among our suffering world.

If there was ever a time that needed to hear this version of the Christmas story, it is now. We need to put Herod back in Christmas, for Herod reminds us all that the Christmas story is not a story that makes comfortable the proud and powerful.

It's not a story that calls us to spend hundreds of dollars on presents or on the latest Christmas dinner dishes, decorations, and desserts while all around the world Rachel is weeping for her children.

The Christmas story is revolutionary. It is a threat to the powers of this world, the tyrannical kings and political leaders, the greedy corporations, the unrelenting consumerism of the holidays. The Christmas story shakes things up, rattles the cages, turning everything upside down.

The Christmas carol we really need to be singing this year, the one that needs to be played over the speakers at the malls and the Walmarts, the one that needs to be sung on the latest Celebrity Christmas album and Christmas special, is the Song of Mary.

Mary the mother of Jesus sang of her soon-to-be-born son:

*“He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy.”*

This year, as the whole world stops to celebrate Christmas, remember Herod. Listen for Rachel's weeping. And declare the true story of Christmas, the story that begins in a stinky stable and ends at the empty tomb; the story of the baby that will turn the world upside down, making a mockery of the powers of our world and our backwards sense of justice and misplaced notions of peace.

This Christmas, tell this revolutionary story. Sing Mary's Christmas carol. Glory in the newborn king, who scatters the proud, brings the powerful down from their thrones, lifts up the lowly, and wipes away the tears of mothers and fathers around the world who are weeping, for their children are no more.