

Kirkwall Presbyterian Church

'Herod'

Matthew 2:13-23

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By Keith Marcy

Herod, King of Judah and surrounding provinces, was an incredibly jealous man. Anyone that he even imagined may attempt to take over his job, he had killed – including his own wife and sons. When the Magi from an eastern country followed the *'Star of the Anointed One,'* they made a terrible mistake. Likely they assumed the *'King of Israel'* would be born in a palace in the capital city. A caravan of camels bearing well-dressed, darker skinned men caused quite a stir when they rode up the main street of Jerusalem. No one was more alarmed than King Herod. When they asked, *'Where is the one born to be King of the Jews?'* Herod's hair likely stood straight up. Finding out from the Jewish teachers of the law that a prophesy foretold Bethlehem would be the birthplace of the Christ, Herod passed this information on to the Magi, **after** he found out exactly when this amazing star had appeared. Then he spoke to the Magi in his native tongue – a lie, *"When you have found the 'Anointed One,' come and tell me so that I may worship Him too."*

The Magi resumed following the *'Star'* which took them to Bethlehem and to the very house where the toddler Jesus was living. They worshipped Him; they presented their gifts to Him; but they never reported back to King Herod, because God warned them in a dream.

Herod waited. It was 6 miles to Bethlehem. Perhaps an hour's walk for a camel. Bethlehem was about the size of Sheffield. The Magi could have called on every house and farm in a day or less. And how long does it take to talk to a one-year-old? Two days went by. Herod is growing impatient. 3 days went by. His mind is thinking his normal thoughts – *'kill someone.'* Day 4 – Herod's evil side rises to the fore. *"Bring in my Chief of Police."*

"Take some soldiers and go to Bethlehem. Execute all the boys under the age of two."

"But they are just babies. Why sir?"

"Because I said so!"

"Yes sir!"

In Bethlehem, Joseph crawled under the covers and fell fast asleep. He was grateful for employment at the local carpenter shop, but the work was long and tiring.

Suddenly someone shook him awake. *"Get up. Take the Child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Herod is going to search for the Child to kill Him!"*

Immediately Joseph sat up – wide awake.

“Mary, Mary,” he called trying to keep his voice calm.

“What is wrong, Joseph?”

“An angel spoke to me. We must flee. Herod is going to try to kill your Child.”

“When?”

“We must flee now. Get me the gold the Magi left. Pack some food, blankets and diapers. Savo told me yesterday he has a trained donkey for sale. I will be back.”

He did not wake Savo. The donkey was in the stable behind Savo’s house. He left three gold coins beside the gate and scrawled a message in the dust on the path, *“Have bought your donkey. Tomorrow you will know why. J”*

Without even a whisper Mary helped him load the food, water, gifts the Magi had left and other essentials into make-shift pack bags tied around the donkey. He gave Mary a leg-up, then handed her the sleeping Jesus. It was 75 miles to Egypt if they followed the trade route to Gaza before turning south – a 3 day walk. However, once they made it 40 miles, they would be out of Herod’s jurisdiction. Joseph reminded himself that every step took them farther from danger. They pressed on.

Herod’s soldiers did not catch them. They passed through Gaza. They were able to buy supplies along the way with the gift of gold. Mary thought to herself as she tried to entertain her active toddler cradled in her lap on the donkey, *‘Yes, God does provide. That is why His name is Jehovah Jireh.’*

At a hostel where they stopped for the night, she heard some men talking about the awful scene in Bethlehem. *“Yes,”* one outspoken man declared, *“the soldiers, they stormed into town and killed all the boys under two. For no reason. They just killed them. Horrible. Horrible. Herod will pay. Mark my words, Jehovah will have the last word.”*

His colleague voiced agreement.

Mary drew her little boy to her and wept.

They found a flat to rent in Egypt. They had left all their simple furnishings in Bethlehem, but kind neighbors rallied to their needs, not caring that they were foreigners. With each gift, no matter how small, Mary uttered a prayer, *“Thank you, YWEH, our provider!”* Joseph was hired at the local wood shop. He even learned new skills – Egyptian methods were more advanced than those in Nazareth. Jesus soon had many Egyptian playmates. And Mary, having been raised in a strictly Jewish culture, had her horizons broadened as Egyptian women befriended her. Could it be – well, just maybe – God was preparing her for Jesus’ future ministry when He accepted Samaritans and Gentiles and the like?

Some scholars think the Holy Family may have remained in Egypt for 5 years. Others think only two. It does not matter. Long enough for the prophecy to be fulfilled, *“Out of Egypt I called my son.”*

Yes, near or far on the horizon of time, Gabriel would make yet a third late night call to a sleeping Joseph!

And what about Herod?

When did he realize that his heinous act to rid the earth of the *‘Anointed One’* proved to be a complete failure?

He probably never knew. It appears his egotistical lifestyle and his acts of indiscriminate killing had worn the patience of God thin. This act of infanticide he ordered to be carried out in Bethlehem was the last straw.

Next week we will consider Herod the Great’s short future.

Before we close today, let us ask, *‘Are some Christmas cards correct when they show the Christ Child with a halo above or around His head?’*

Before we answer, consider this: Jesus was a target of King Herod. Herod wanted His life! Jesus was a helpless little toddler. A wee child still feeding from his mother’s breasts. His protection from a *‘tyrant’* fell totally in the hands of two people chosen by God – Mary and Joseph. There is no question that God provided for them and strengthened them and guided them. But Jesus’ protection and nurturing was left to their love, care and devotion, the same as any other young child.

You are reading this today because your parents or appointed guardians provided your needs and cared for you. And so, from this historical incident recorded by Matthew, we see an important truth: When God took on human flesh, He became just as much a human being as any other baby. In order to save us, He had to.

The writer of Hebrews summarizes this truth when he recalls that Jesus became our High Priest – the One who presents us before God:

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. (Hebrews 4:14-16)