

little kids to hear unless we want their visions of sugarplums to be replaced by bloody nightmares.

Herod is enraged to learn the magi have given him the slip, and he sends his soldiers out to commit an atrocity worthy of Hitler's SS. They are to break into every Jewish home in the region around Bethlehem, pull every male baby from the arms of their mothers and slit their little throats.

Believe it or not, there's a Christmas carol about this woeful business. It's called the Coventry Carol. Ironically, it has one of the most achingly beautiful melodies of all Christmas music. The words are a melancholy lullaby, sung by grieving mothers to their dead children:

*Herod the king, in his raging, charged he hath this day,  
His men of might, in his own sight, all young children to slay.  
Then woe is me, poor child for thee and ever mourn and say  
For thy parting, nor say nor sing by, by, lully, lullay.*

What part does this dark episode have to play in the bright and joyous tale of Christmas? It's a discordant note, struck in the closing bars of a beautiful melody. Until now, everything has been sweetness and light; but then, the fists of Herod's soldiers come pounding on Bethlehem's doors. The mothers of the City of David weep their bitter tears, and cradle their lifeless babes in their arms: *Lullay, Thou little tiny child, By, by, lully, lullay.*

Herod was a bitter old man, nearing the end of his 41-year reign; he was a monster fully capable of playing a role in such atrocities. But Herod was king in name only and everyone knew it: the Romans really called the shots. Herod's job was to do the imperial dirty work, subduing a rebellious colony on behalf of the emperor, a task he performed with relish.

During the course of his reign, Herod had at least nine wives and 14 children. There were probably more, but daughters' births were not always recorded. He put one of his wives, Mariamne, on trial for adultery. Chief witness for the prosecution was Mariamne's own mother who testified against her daughter because she feared for her own life. Herod executed Mariamne, which led her mother to declare herself queen, charging that Herod was mentally unfit to rule. Not a wise decision on her part. Herod put her to death without a trial. Talk about a dysfunctional family!

But wait, there's more! Herod and Mariamne had two sons who, as they grew older, Herod feared as threats to his power. He sought to put them on trial for treason, but the Emperor Augustus intervened and ordered the sons and the father to reconcile. A few years later, Herod outmaneuvered the emperor by sending a huge financial donation to revive the Olympic Games, something Augustus very much wanted. In exchange, the emperor turned a blind eye when Herod executed his sons. Augustus is said to have remarked, "I would rather be Herod's dog than Herod's son."

But that's still not all. After murdering his wife and his sons, Herod named his eldest son, Antipater - a child of a different mother - the exclusive heir to the throne. But Herod never could tolerate a rival. He grew jealous of his latest crown prince. He put him on trial for treason like the others and had him executed. The emperor was so appalled that he refused to allow any of Herod's remaining sons to claim the title of king - although three of them would eventually rule as "tetrarchs," each governing one-third of his father's realm. Thirty-three years later, one of them, Herod Antipas, would look upon Jesus at last, as he stood before him in chains, wearing a crown of thorns.

We don't know when it was, exactly, that the magi stopped by the palace to pay their courtesy call, but it was probably during this last, turbulent year of Herod's life. By this point, few could doubt that this man was capable of dispatching soldiers to kill babies!

Jesus, of course, escaped that fate. An angel of the Lord came to Joseph in a dream, warning him to take his little family and flee to Egypt. There they probably settled in the thriving Jewish quarter of Alexandria, a great center of learning. It's possible Jesus spent his early years there, and learned Talmud from the distinguished rabbis of that city.

We find it troubling that God sends an angel to rescue Jesus, but lets those other little babies die. It's another facet of the thorny theological problem we face so often in this world: the problem of evil, the question of why a just, compassionate, and all-powerful God allows human suffering to take place. There's no easy answer to that philosophical question, but King Herod does seem well-suited to play the role of evil incarnate.

So, what's the takeaway? Should we reserve a role for Herod in next year's Sunday school Christmas pageant? No. Herod doesn't belong in a children's Christmas play, but that doesn't mean we should forget about him entirely.

Herod's important to the Christmas story because *he helps us remember what kind of world we live in and why this world still needs a savior*. Even if we all had a pleasant Christmas, there are plenty of neighbors on this planet whose lives are tainted with suffering - people for whom the least of their worries is whether or not they managed to get into the Christmas spirit.

What about those hordes of desperate Syrian refugees who have swelled the population of Europe and the small trickle who have been so fortunate as to be resettled in the United States or Canada? A significant number of these refugees are Christians, members of some of the oldest Christian churches in the world. They're wondering if they will ever return to the land of their ancestors - and whether those ancient churches will ever again resound with Christian hymns. What about the immigrants in our own country, who came here seeking a better life in the land of the free? What kind of Christmas did they have this year?

Then there are those who are afflicted by poverty here in this land. Lots of our neighbors "had themselves a merry little Christmas," but a great many more found themselves far removed from the vision of perfection and peace portrayed on so many sparkly Christmas cards.

Jesus didn't come into the world to bring us a mid-winter festival of peace and contentment. He wasn't born into a placid Christmas-card scene, but rather into the sort of world where families wander homeless and corrupt tyrants rule by murder and deceit. Jesus didn't come to offer respite from the world. He came to save it. So we must keep Herod in Christmas. He reminds us that we need a Savior. In a sense, Herod represents the real reason for the season, the reason Jesus came, to save us and put the world right again.

Prayer: God of light, shining in darkness, through a little child, born in Bethlehem, you open to us the treasure of your grace. Help us to search diligently for him, so that we may offer our lives to you with thanksgiving, joy, and praise; through Jesus Christ, the rising star. Shepherd of Israel, you sent a star to enlighten the wise and a child to topple the tyrant. Make us wise enough to seek you among the least of your children, wise enough to trade our treasure for the gift of overwhelming joy. **Amen**

## Keeping Herod in Christmas

**New Years' Day, January 1, 2017**

**The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN**

**Matthew 2:13-23**

"Let's keep Christ in Christmas!" It's a popular slogan, glimpsed on many a bumper or billboard. Politicians have their own variant, as they champion legislation encouraging store clerks to say "Merry Christmas" rather than "Season's Greetings" or "Happy Holidays." The point is to remember that Jesus is the reason for the season.

All over the country, children of church families have recently put on Christmas pageants that tell the story of the nativity. The cast of characters may vary, but always there are three individuals at the heart of the story: Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus. Angels and shepherds come and go, in various numbers. Wise men may show up bearing gifts. There may be an assortment of barnyard animals, either real or portrayed by kids in costume. There may even be an innkeeper to say "Sorry, no vacancy!" and slam the door.

**The missing person in the pageant.** Yet there is one figure from the biblical narrative you'll rarely see portrayed in a children's Christmas pageant: King Herod. He's just too mean and nasty for that holy night.

It's common, on Epiphany, to read the story from Matthew about how wise men came to the court of King Herod, asking where they could find the child born King of the Jews. Herod, of course, was the real, live king of the Jews. But he was too crafty a politician to show his hand too soon. There was intelligence to be gathered and if these naïve foreigners could be enlisted as spies to lead him to this King of the Jews, so much the better.

Fortunately, the visitors from the east are no dummies: they see right through Herod's smarmy hospitality. They return to their own country "by another way." That's where our Christmas Eve reading from Matthew typically ends.

But that's only the first part of the story. Nobody ever wants to read the second part on Christmas Eve, because the details are so horrific. Wise men dropping off baby presents is one thing. What comes next is rated "R" for intense violence. Not the sort of thing we want