

A Sermon by Alex Evans
Blacksburg Presbyterian Church, Blacksburg, VA
From Sunday, December 30, 2007
Text: **Matthew 2:13-23**

“What Happens After Christmas?”

We have a strange phenomenon in our culture. Almost immediately after Thanksgiving, we begin hearing Christmas carols. They play on the radio through the final days of November and all through December. Our culture also puts Christmas decorations up very early. We have had Christmas lights everywhere. Our society seems to have this rush to get to Christmas.

But this rush to get to Christmas occurs mostly because we are a culture not adept at waiting. We want to get there – get to Christmas, get to wherever we are going – as soon as we can. Waiting and watching and anticipating – the things on this banner - are not in style in our society.

However, the church never wants to rush to Christmas. We have Advent: a season of waiting, watching, preparing. These things, according to our faith, are virtues. We know that Christmas means more, and God’s coming is more significant, when we wait, when we prepare, watch, anticipate.

And then, after Christmas, do you notice what happens? It is switched up again. Our culture wants to put Christmas away as soon as the sun goes down on Christmas Day. In the blink of an eye, the culture jumps to the new year – no more carols, no more Christmas greetings. The lights may be up for a while, but not that long. We pack up Christmas and move on.

What does the church do? The church keeps with Christmas. We keep singing the carols. We keep up with talk of the Savior’s birth. The waiting and anticipating in the church shift to the celebration and joy of Christmas. Even next Sunday, the lesson from the day comes from Matthew and that gospel’s version of Jesus’ birth with the visit of the wise men from the east.

Today’s text – the first Sunday after Christmas - comes from Matthew too. It is sort of the next significant scene in the drama after Jesus is born. And it is another story about Joseph, who is charged with keeping Mary and Jesus safe, of making sure that the Messiah’s birth and care go well. (Matthew really likes Joseph and keeps him front and center in his story).

In the passage today, Joseph has another dream – in fact two more dreams. Already we have heard about Joseph and his dream in chapter 1 that convinced him that he should not abandon Mary, though she was pregnant with child. He got the word that this baby in Mary’s womb was “Spirit-conceived” and that this baby would be called Jesus because he saves his people from their sins.”

But this baby is more than a Savior. As the words continue in Matthew 2, this baby, if he is really coming to bring God’s promised rule, is also a serious threat to the rulers of the day. So the angel comes again to Joseph to alert him. “Get up. Take this child and his mother and flee to Egypt. ... Herod is on the hunt for this child and wants to kill him.”

I guess we all know that Herod is the Roman government's ruler in this region of Palestine. Basically, someone from Herod's family had reigned there on behalf of Rome for about 75 years. In the years around Jesus' birth, this Herod in the gospels is a man of significant strength and reputation. He had been in power for several decades. He had built some major fortresses and palaces, like Masada. He had overseen the huge temple and temple walls in Jerusalem – the one that Jesus and his disciples knew during Jesus' ministry. But like many kings, Herod stayed in power and control because of his ruthlessness. He squashed any threat. He attacked any foe. He even killed three of his own sons, who he feared were plotting against him. One historian even quotes Caesar Augustus as saying "it is better to be Herod's pig than Herod's son." So this story in Matthew 2 about Herod slaughtering the innocent boys of Bethlehem comes in a legitimate context. (see D. Bruner, Matthew)

But listen to this, as one commentator puts it: Herod is a picture of life under sin. He is a picture of self-centeredness. He is a picture of a paranoid life who existed by threat and intimidation. He is one who rules by oppression. So it should be no surprise that when Herod learns that a new king, a Messiah, has been born, it becomes a personal affront to Herod. And when he cannot find this new king who has been born, he goes on a rampage of slaughter, killing any who might be this new king. As the lesson reminds us, "when Herod realized that had happened, he flew into a rage. He commanded the murder of every little boy two years old and under who lived in Bethlehem and its surrounding hills."

It might be easy to dismiss Herod as a sick and oppressive ruler, kind of like Hitler. He is a person easy to condemn – "who would ever do such a thing! How could anyone be like that?" We are people of Jesus. Herod is the easy villain of the story. We are appalled by his anger and viciousness and then move on from him, striving to follow the real King - Jesus.

But we should be careful to do that. What Herod teaches us has to do with "what happens after Christmas?" One of the first reactions of raw human nature to the birth of Jesus, the Messiah, is rebellion. If Jesus is Lord, then we are not Lord. We want the say over our lives, right? If Jesus is King, then what we thought was our sovereignty is over. Jesus is sovereign over us, and all things, right?

Well, Herod is not really the big villain of the story. He is also, potentially, everyone of us. Herod's reaction to a Center of the universe other than himself is dis-ease. That dis-ease leads to fear and anger. That fear and anger lead to vicious actions to preserve himself. And it is all messed up.

How often do we see this in our own leaders? Leaders justify plans and actions to preserve power and prestige. That region of the world, Palestine, was Herod's territory. Anything else was a threat! So off he goes preserving it, with viciousness.

What is the world supposed to look like? We get visions of it in our heads and then justify every means to achieve a certain end – the preservation of what we thought was safe, and good, and right. It is happening today in Pakistan – where leaders are fussing and scraping to preserve power and prominence. It is happening in Afghanistan – where people are fussing and fighting. It is happening in the Middle East, where leader keep fussing about their place and trying to preserve it. And in Iraq and Iran and other places

But often we are wrong about these things. Often we cannot see something new that is coming, better, more hopeful, more peaceful, more positive.

The birth of the Messiah wants to show us we are not the center of the universe – God is – and all things are to be moving towards God’s reign, not our reign on earth.
Herod couldn’t stand that idea.

How often do we see ourselves doing these things? How often do we really resist what God is offering, what God is bringing to us and to the world?

We have plans and pursuits. We assume we know what is best. And we can get pretty closed to the idea that God even exists and is part of the story of our lives. We think we know better, and refuse to think that God has other purposes. We might even find ourselves doing some pretty dubious things to achieve our ends.

But the birth of the Messiah, the real king of the world, wants to show us whose world this is and what life is about. It is not about what Herod wants, but about what God wants and what God is doing in the world. It is not about what we want, and what we think is best, but about redemption and wholeness and hope for us and for our world. It is not about our power, but peace. It is not our plans, but God’s purposes.

So what happens after Christmas? For Herod, he shows out. He reveals one way of living life – paranoia, selfishness, and violent pursuits. Jesus is a threat to Herod and to Herod’s ways, which involve fear and finding, keeping and killing. What matters to Herod is not Jesus, or God’s coming reign. What matters is what is best for Herod. And Herod shows us some things about ourselves, and “our way of life.” It is not meant to be about us, and what we want, and that we can do all that we want to do. It is about God – and God’s coming, and God’s new order, and about peace and light for us and for the world.

See, when the Messiah is born, we are to see things differently. We are to recognize that this really is God’s world. There is no where we can go when God is not with us. In fact, God is among us. And all of life intends to be about the things of God – hope for the desperate, peace in the turmoil, food for the hungry, healing for the hurting, light for the darkness. And our lives are to be about promoting those things – not living selfishly like Herod, not preserving things just for ourselves like Herod, not going off the deep end killing and acting like the only thing that matters is preserving what we have!

No, God has bigger and better plans.

So, God protects this Messiah. In a dream he gets Joseph to take Mary and the Babe to Egypt, to safety, from Herod’s frightening and self-serving ways.

If you know a little about the Bible, this story sounds familiar. God is always working to protect God’s plans and achieve God’s purposes. Almost 2000 years earlier, a famine struck the land and God’s people were threatened. God led them down to Egypt. There they survived, mostly because God has chosen and sent another Joseph there to make sure famine did not overtake that land too. You can read about this at the end of Genesis. And God worked through that Joseph to save and secure God’s people, God’s plans, and God’s peace.

Then, some generations later, down in Egypt, a wicked King felt threatened that these Hebrews were becoming too prominent in the land. This story is in Exodus 1. So

he ordered all Hebrew babies killed, thrown into the Nile to drown. One Hebrew boy, Moses was rescued. God is often working through unsuspecting people to preserve God's purposes. Little Moses was rescued by two midwives named Shiphrah and Puah.

Later, when oppression and slavery were about to doom the Hebrew people again, they were led out of Egypt, running from another oppressive and selfish King. Moses, the very one saved along the banks of the Nile, led them out of harm's way, crossing the Red Sea, in the great Exodus, a benchmark moment for God's people.

What happens when selfishness and oppression and violent threats to slaughter God's plans and God's people come along? God acts. God saves. God shows another way. Oppressive power is not the center of the universe. Indecent and inhumane treatment is not what God intends. Violence against one another to preserve personal prestige does not work out. God has other intentions. They are revealed again in Jesus - it is about peace and love, hope and justice, life and life together, light and joy for everyone. This is what God keeps working for. When do you think we might figure this out!?!

So, we get back to our gospel lesson from Matthew 2. The angel tells Joseph to get up and flee and save God's Messiah and God's plans once again from the selfish and sick pursuits of leaders and kings who think they are in charge. No, God is in charge. And God's purposes for life and light will NOT be frustrated. Another strong and vicious ruler cannot win out against God. God's plan, God's reign continues to come among us.

So what happens after Christmas? We really cannot dismiss Herod so quickly. He is a warning to us, an example of what happens whenever we despise grace, whenever we think we are the center of all things. We can do vicious things to preserve our sense of power and privilege. We can destroy innocent people – with our words and actions. We can lose sight of the reality that this is God's world and our lives are to be lived aligned with God's purposes – which point to love, to light, to joy, to hope, to forgiveness, and compassion and a new world.

What happens after Christmas? We are to find and follow the Messiah, Jesus, who shows us what life is about – not prosperity for a few, but for all, not equity in some places, but everywhere, not justice sometimes, but always, not light and hope in some moments, but for all people everywhere, not forgiveness sometimes, but all the time, not care about our turf, but thinking and working in the world for God's purposes, always!

What really happens after Christmas? We have much work to do as God's people.

Prayer: Holy God, touch our hearts with your grand and powerful presence; fill us with your love. And send us out as Christmas people to live and love and serve you in the world for peace, hope, and light. Amen

This sermon was preached as a part of regular morning worship at Blacksburg Presbyterian Church, Blacksburg, VA on Sunday, December 30, 2007 by Alex Evans, Pastor. This is a rough manuscript.