

“The Man Who hated Christmas”

Matthew 2:1-18

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The man who hated Christmas. Who am I talking about? Ebenezer Scrooge, the miser whose motto was “Christmas, bah, humbug?” Or is it the Grinch, the creature who tries to steal Christmas because he can’t stand to see people happy? Well, neither. Today we are going to talk about a real person, an individual who plays an important role in the Bible’s account of Jesus’ birth, but who is seldom mentioned in Christmas programs or sermons. His name is King Herod. In the book “The Best Christmas Pageant Ever,” the Herdman children are fascinated with this fellow they call “King Harold.” They want someone in the play to beat him up and the pageant to conclude with him being executed. But, that is not quite how the story goes. Today we turn to Matthew 2 and take a closer look at Herod, *The Man Who Hated Christmas*. I think it will also be a good time for us to examine our lives to make sure our attitude toward Christmas pleases the Lord. Let’s pause and pray God would enable us to hear, understand and obey His word today.

Herod, the man who hated Christmas. Who was he? Historians tell us that Herod the Great, the King of the Jews, was born in 73 B.C. His father was Antipater II, a Jew appointed by Julius Caesar as governor of Judea. Herod was named “King of Judea” by Mark Anthony in 40 B.C. After a three-year civil war, his power was never really challenged. Most historians regard him as an effective, but cruel, authoritarian ruler. In a fit of rage, he had his wife executed, and in 7 B.C. he had two of his sons killed because he saw them as a threat to his throne. Before Herod’s death, a third son was executed for the same reason.

When Herod died he was replaced by three remaining sons who divided up his kingdom. One was Herod Antipas, or Herod the Tetrarch, who we read about in the New Testament. He is the fellow who executes John the Baptist and who send Jesus back to Pilate after the Jewish leaders bring Jesus before him. The date of Herod the Great’s death is something which has been discussed by scholars of the years. Traditionally, historians have said Herod died in 4 B.C., which means Jesus was probably born in about 5 B.C. You might wonder how Jesus could be born 5 years before Christ, but remember, the Bible doesn’t give us a date of

Jesus’ birth. It tells us He was born during the reign of Caesar Augustus, in the days of King Herod. Recently some historians have made a strong argument that Herod died in 1 B.C. which means Jesus could have been born in maybe 2 B.C. Anyway, when the wise men or magi arrive in Jerusalem, Herod the Great is king.

Matthew tells us of Herod’s attempt to kill Jesus. There are really two attempts, both which fail. When he hears what the Wise men tell him of their quest, he becomes jealous and angry. **Matthew 2:8 And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.”** The first plan is to have them locate the baby for him, so he can have the child killed. However, this plan is foiled **Matthew 2:12 And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.** It is only about five miles between Jerusalem and Bethlehem, so Herod quickly figures out the wise men are not coming back. **Matthew 2:16 The Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men.**

This is a terrible crime. I remember hearing this story for the first time when I was a child. It sent a shiver down my spine, and kind of still does today. Just to make sure he eliminates the new born king, Herod has every boy in Bethlehem under two years of age killed. This doesn’t necessarily mean Herod thought Jesus’ birth occurred many months earlier. He just wanted to make sure he got rid of Jesus, and had no qualms about killing others in the process. Now, Bethlehem was not a large city. Historians estimate there were probably no more than 10 or 12 boys killed by Herod’s soldiers, but it was still a very cruel act.

Yet, Herod’s second plan to kill Jesus fails as well. In verses 13-15 an angel warns Joseph of the plot, so he, Mary and the baby go into exile in Egypt where they remain until Herod’s death. Note that

his very cruel plan doesn't catch God by surprise. Not only is the Lord active throughout this story, warning both the Wise men and Joseph of Herod's intentions, but the whole scenario is a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. As Matthew tells us, the exile in Egypt was foretold in Hosea 11:1, where the Lord says, "Out of Egypt I have called my son." The slaughter of the babies in Bethlehem is a fulfillment of Jeremiah 31:15 which speaks of "Rachel weeping for her children, because her children are no more." We are reminded that no matter how powerful evil is, God's plan will be fulfilled. His purpose will be accomplished. As someone says, "There ain't no trying to beat God." Herod could not stop Christmas any more than Ebenezer Scrooge or the Grinch could. And friends, that is great comfort for us in this room. Whether it is Herod, Pharaoh or Pilate; whether it is Hitler, Stalin, or Mao, whether it is not Korea, Iran, the Taliban or Isis, none of these can ever do anything to prevent God from fulfilling His plan. As John Calvin said, "Though hostile forces rage and chaos threatens, God is King. Therefore, His people are safe."

So why did Herod hate Christmas? Why did he feel such enmity toward a little baby? I think Herod hated Christmas because he saw the Christ child as a threat to his power. Now, that may seem like the L.A. Lakers feeling threatened by the Chisholm basketball team, but to Herod the threat seemed very real. He had three of his own sons killed because he feared they might try taking his throne, so he was prone to feelings of envy and jealousy. When he heard the wise men had come to worship Jesus, Herod may have thought, "Hey, why aren't they here to worship me?" He didn't want anyone else to be the center of attention. Folks, jealousy can be a very powerful trap. Maybe you have felt its power in your life. Perhaps you have done or said things that were not very nice because you envied someone. Jealousy can be a very destructive emotion, and Herod was plagued by it.

Yet, his problem with Christmas was more than jealousy. In verse 4 we learn that Herod consulted with priests and teachers of the law. It is obvious he has heard the Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah. He may have feared this baby might just be the one of whom they prophets had spoken. Herod probably realized that when the Messiah came, his power would lose all its meaning. Herod was king of the mountain. He

wanted to stay on top. But when the Messiah comes, everything would be turned upside down. When the Messiah rules as king, righteousness and kindness, not wealth and power will be what matter the most. It is easy to see why Herod would not be really excited about this new kingdom. Luke 2 says Simeon was in the Temple waiting for the Messiah to come, dreaming of how marvelous this kingdom would be. Herod was in his palace dreading that day. If he dreamt about it, the dreams were nightmares. When Herod hears the wise men have come to see a king in Bethlehem, it is no surprise that he hates Christmas.

Herod may have been the first to hate Christmas and be disturbed by the event. But he is not the last. Many people who hate Christmas because they don't like the idea of Jesus being a king. Oh, they don't mind the modern celebration of Christmas, but the message of Christmas is threatening. Now, some of us feel the opposite. We cherish the message, but find parts of the celebration to be somewhat of a pain. Yet, lots of folks like to shop, love to deck the halls and hang up lights, *but they want to avoid* what the celebration is supposed to be about. Oh, they are not really threatened by the baby Jesus. He is kind of cute. But, like Herod they are very much *afraid of the King Jesus*. And friends, that is indeed the heart of the Christmas message. Jesus the King is born. Angels, shepherds, and wise men all came to worship a king, the King of kings and Lord of lords. Part of the message of Christmas is that all of us are called to worship the King. It seems many folks sing Christmas carols without really thinking about the words they are singing. Some who sing, "Oh come let us adore Him, Christ the Lord," have no intention of doing that. In fact, if they realize what the words mean, they may not want to sing that song. Some people have no more desire to acknowledge Jesus as the King than Herod did. Though they may hang up Christmas lights and put presents under the tree, they hate the true meaning of Christmas, the truth that Jesus the Messiah and King has come.

Yet, as I was thinking about Jesus the King this week, I realized the problem is not just with folks out there who want to take Christ out of Christmas. There are also people sitting in church most Sunday mornings, and even some preaching behind pulpits or little Plexiglas podiums who are not real comfortable with the idea of Jesus being

King. Oh, we call Him that, but frankly, we often don't want to think about what it means to live as a citizen of Jesus' Kingdom. Let me mention two things Jesus kingship should mean in our lives.

First, if Jesus is our King, we should be loyal to Him. Jesus would not allow us to continue to serve other kings. He would not share our allegiance with anyone or anything else. That means, for example, that we should be more loyal to Jesus than to any other human being. Now, maybe you are thinking, "Wait a minute, Pastor Dan, doesn't God want us to be loyal to our family and friends?" Well, yes, that is right He does. But our loyalty to them should never equal our loyalty to Jesus Christ. In **Luke 14:26** Jesus makes a very strange statement when he says, "**If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters**, "What are you saying, Pastor Dan? I thought the Bible said we are to honor our parents, and that husbands are to love their wives and parents should certainly love their children. Does Jesus really want us to hate these people?"

No, of course not. But he uses this language, this hyperbole, to make a point. If we wish to be His disciples, if we want to be under His Kingship, our lover for our family must never interfere with or come before our loyalty to Jesus. As Christians, He is our King. Our parents are not, our spouse is not, our children are not. In the vast majority of situations, obeying King Jesus would mean that we serve our family members. Yet, once in a while something will come up where it is very clear that the Lord wants us to do one thing, while our family and friends want us to do another. Maybe it involves a job change, or being involved in a different ministry, but whatever the situation, if Jesus is truly your King, your focus needs to be on pleasing Him. Sometimes we have to say to family and friends, "I'm sorry, but this is what I have to do, because I believe this is what the Lord, my King, wants me to do." Friends, we can only serve one King.

Many other things besides family compete with King Jesus for our allegiance. It is good to be loyal to a country, a political party, a football team, or to a church. But, again, none of these should ever be allowed to interfere with our loyalty to King Jesus. Forty-six years ago I was headed for college at University of Wisconsin Eau Claire. My goal at the time was to go to law school, become a lawyer

and get into politics. That was not a bad goal. The Lord calls many Christians to do things like that. However, He was not calling me to do so. During those first couple years in college, I had to ask myself a number of times, "What is my priority? Is it serving God or is it serving a political cause?" I understand that I needed to be loyal to God, and then realized He was calling me to go to seminary and serve Him as a pastor or Bible teacher, not a lawyer. And boy, am I glad He made that clear to me. Another thing which often competes for our loyalty is money or material things. Yet, if we are to honor Jesus as our King, money cannot be our king. Jesus says **Matthew 6:24 You cannot serve God and money**. Period! Friends if your goal in life is to build up your bank account, you are not really following Jesus. If He is King, your money really belongs to Him. Yes, He entrusts it to you to use, but you are to use it in a way which please Him.

Second, if Jesus is our King, He expects us to submit to His authority. He wants us to do things His way, not our way. If Jesus is King, it means I cannot be king. That can be hard to swallow. Most of us want to be the captain of our own ship. As Christians, we are under new ownership and we should be under new management. There is a new captain. Now, that is not easy, because some things in our lives would probably have to change if Jesus is in charge. For example, if I am in charge, I won't always choose to forgive those who I think have hurt me. I can try to get even somehow. However, if Jesus is in charge, I cannot do that. I have to be willing to forgive others and avoid seeking revenge. If I am in charge, some gossip and a little white lie once in a while are acceptable. But, if Jesus is in charge, those things have no place in my life. If I am in charge, I make decisions based on what "I want to do." If Jesus is in charge, then glorifying God and serving others are what I need to be doing. Things are very different if we treat Jesus as the King.

Friends, there are kind of two sides to the Christmas story. The first is the good news of great joy for all people. A Savior is born. His name is Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins. Emmanuel has come and God is with us. That is a beautiful side of Christmas and it is so true and so wonderful. But there is also another side. The true meaning of Christmas includes the fact Jesus is King and we are to submit to His rule. Maybe you are thinking, "Pastor Dan, Christmas used to

be my favorite holiday. Now, you make it sound so hard. I kind of like "Groundhogs Day" better. I don't have to do anything then."

Yet, friends if that is what you are thinking, you don't understand. Christmas is better news than you have imagined. Though it is not always easy, there is no greater joy in this world than seeking to live as a loyal subject of King Jesus. Once you experience that joy, you will never be satisfied with merely having fun or doing things your own way. To be loyal to King Jesus, to submit to His rule, and to serve Him each day are not sacrifices. As citizens of Jesus' Kingdom we are heirs to what Peter calls "great and precious promises." To occupy the lowest possible position in Jesus' kingdom, cleaning bathrooms or whatever, is far better than having the highest position in any other kingdom. Why?

Because all the kingdoms of this world would one day come crashing down, and only the kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, will continue to thrive throughout eternity.

Friends, the best way to celebrate Christmas is to honor Jesus our King. In England the Queen's birthday is a national holiday. Guess what? It is not a holiday here. Why? Because we are not her subjects. We are not under her rule. We took care of that back in 1776. Folks, Christmas is the birthday of King Jesus. It really makes little sense to celebrate unless you are willing to acknowledge Him as your King. How do you become a subject of King Jesus? By becoming a Christian, by trusting in Him as Savior and Lord. This means turning away from being self-sufficient and self-confident and instead relying on Jesus and what He has accomplished through His life, death and resurrection. The greatest gift ever given was God, the Father, sending, Jesus, God the Son, to be the Savior of all who trust in Him. Friends, have you received that gift? If not, I pray the Lord would enable you to turn to Him today. If you are not sure what I mean, please talk to me.

Now, if you are a Christian and a citizen of Jesus' Kingdom, I have a challenge for you as well. Make sure you are treating Him like your King. To do that, you may want to give Him a belated Christmas present. No, I'm not talking about putting some gold, myrrh or frankincense under the Christmas tree. Instead, I suggest you identify one part of your life which you have tried to be in

charge of lately and from now on, allow the Lord be in charge of that. For example, you might say, "Lord, you know I have been dealing with people in the way I thought best. From now on you are in charge. I want to do things your way when I relate to my family, friends, and other people in the church. I know this means I will not be able to hold grudges or vent my anger whenever I feel like it. But I want to do things your way." Or you might say, "Lord, from now on I want to commit my money or my time to you. Instead of always being so selfish with what I have and just thinking about what makes me comfortable and happy, I want to be more generous in sharing my money or time with others." Or maybe you will say, "Lord, from now on I will try to be more selective in what TV shows I watch and to what music I listen. There is a lot of rotten stuff out there, and because I want you to be in charge I will try to choose entertainment that is pleasing to you." Friends, I don't know what honoring Jesus as your King will mean in practical terms for you, but I do know that if you are a citizen of Jesus' Kingdom it is something you should do.

Friends, Herod hated Christmas, the coming of King Jesus, because he rejected Jesus' rule over his life. By God's grace may we experience the true meaning of Christmas as we embrace Jesus as our King.