

# SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE

THE CRADLE THAT ROCKED A THRONE

*"When Herod the king heard this, he was  
troubled, and all Jerusalem with him..."*


*Matthew 2:3*

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## THE CRADLE THAT ROCKED A THRONE

*"When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him..."*

*Matthew 2:3*

What an unlikely turn that is! A king upset by a baby. Cradle power unnerving a throne. Usually kings are troubled by malcontents who are capable of insurrection, or mounting public indignation or enemy troops camped along a border. But a child -- weeks old? This is curious indeed.

If you were explaining this development to a granddaughter you would sooner or later have to say that this was no ordinary king, and that no ordinary child.

\* \* \*

Herod was the puppet king of Galilee. He had been placed there by Rome in return for keeping peace in the province. Herod is not a "heavy" as kings go. His territory was relatively small. Had Jesus not been born under his political jurisdiction the world would scarcely have heard his name. He is not to be numbered with such as Charlemagne or James I, or Frederick the Great.

Herod hailed from a venal and detested family. Fittingly and consistently he is described as cruel, crafty, capable, passionate and intensely suspicious. He was a man of physical and moral violence. He had his three sons killed and his wife. To insure mourning in the land when he died he had some Jews rounded up with orders that when he died they should be killed also. Hence, it comes as no surprise that in an almost matter-of-fact way Herod decrees that all male children two years old and under should be done away with.

Herod was not a heavy as kings go but he is perhaps the heaviest villain reported on in Scripture. He

outranks such Biblical unworthies as the Pharaoh of the Exodus, Nebuchadnezzar, Tiglath-pileser, Goliath, yes -- and even Pontius Pilate.

"He was troubled and all Jerusalem with him." An agitated king can set an entire city to seething, just as a tyrannical father can put an entire family on edge.

\* \* \*

It is one of history's major pranks that this vicious and benighted monarch should be juxtaposed with Jesus. Jesus -- awaited by the faithful, heralded by angels, visited by shepherds, sought out by wise men. Jesus -- around whose head clustered pious hopes and lofty expectations. Jesus -- marked and destined for a special role in the history of humankind. "When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled and all Jerusalem with Him."

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Herod's troubled nature can be understood on two different levels. He was troubled because this is a moral universe. To explain what was eating Herod we need do nothing more than invoke the insight of Paul in his Galatian letter: "Be not deceived; God is not mocked, for whatever a man sows, that shall he also reap." (Gal. 6:7) Herod affords us an extreme example of a common human experience. He was his own worst enemy. He carried about within him his own darkness and thus was always fearful of the light.

An interesting snatch of dialogue between Ahab and Elijah is captured for us in the Old Testament: "When Ahab saw Elijah, he said to him, 'Is it you, you troubler of Israel?' Elijah answered, 'I have not troubled Israel; but you have and your father's house, because you have forsaken the commandments of the Lord and followed the Baals.'" (I Kings 18:17,18)

The concept of a moral universe comes with the force of novelty to an age that can hardly distinguish

right from wrong. An age that lives with Gallup Poll morality and consensus ethics. We keep giving the moral factor short shrift in our analyses of problems. We are quick to notice and acknowledge psychological factors, economic factors, political factors and cultural factors. But, as is obvious to all, our neglect of the moral is coming home to haunt us. We are a troubled people living in a troubled world.

The scenario presently being worked out in this country around Watergate and the fuel crisis is a case in point. The situation can be described in political terms, I suppose. It can surely be described in economic terms. But it can also be described in moral terms as the vengeance of our own greed. One faction after another in our society reaches to get its share. The truckers are quite sure that nothing will move if they don't get theirs. The oil people are certain that we will not stay warm or moving unless they get theirs. The firemen in this city made sure recently that no one would get protection unless they got theirs.

Back in 1955 when floods struck the Poconos and scores of people died, the price of body bags trebled inside of twelve hours. Economically we call that the law of supply and demand. Morally we call it greed.

We dare not get so sophisticated in our theology, so accommodating in our love of the world, that we fail to witness as Christians to the moral order on which men and nations can be made or broken. Herod had mocked God and there was hell to pay. It was a hell of his own making.

\* \* \*

But Herod was troubled for yet another reason. Symbolically, Herod represents a present that is always under threat of the future. Even had Herod been an upright man he would have felt the insurgency of what Christ represented.

I took you to Galatians a moment ago. I should

like now to take you to a relevant passage in Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church. In Chapter I of that letter we find words that had best be read either in Bethlehem or at Golgatha. Listen: "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose things that are not to bring to nothing things that are." (I Cor. 1:27-28)

Those first two couplets we can understand -- things foolish to shame the wise, things weak to shame the strong. We have, in the world's eyes, a beggarly gospel for the deliverance of a beggarly people. And yet, a gospel of surprising potency.

But what do we make out of that third couplet? "God chose things that are not to bring to nothing things that are." Here is a philosophy of history. Here is foundational material for a theology of hope.

Colin Morris has given us a new book entitled The Hammer of the Lord. In it he makes this highly suggestive comment: "Our societies and systems are merely extant alternatives to the creative possibilities still capable of superseding them if they fail to achieve their God-given purposes.....It is a terrible pride that blinds us to the truth that any force or power in history which is not of our making has an equal or even greater right to exist than our own." 1

Morris is saying that things that are are always being threatened by things that are not, that what has actually been realized in history is always being pressured by the "not yet" that is in transit, coming and moving in. To put it simply and perhaps aphoristically: All that is is threatened by the ought to be that isn't.

All human power, whether regal or personal, is provisional and tentative. The key Greek verb is strong: "God chose things that are not to bring to nothing -- that is, 'to render inoperative' -- things that are," including all the little pretentious Herods



of this world. That's why Herod had the babies killed. Give him credit for being smart enough to see that what he was about and what Christ was about could not permanently coexist! That's why the crowd said, on that fateful day, "Give us Barabbas, we'd rather have him loose than Jesus!" That's why Pilate hardly lifted a hand to save him!

The things that are are always threatened by the things that are not. This is easily seen at the personal level. A girl at the tender age of nineteen marries the wrong guy for the wrong reasons. Being somewhat noble of spirit she decides to tough it out. But that marriage that is is always overshadowed by the marriage that is not.

A young man gets out of high school. His parents urge him to go on for further training. But he goes for the quick dollar and the first job offer. He marries. Children come. He finds himself chronically under-employed. Even though he whistles on his way to work every morning his heart is heavy with thoughts of a vocation that is not. This is why there is a universal human cry,

"O for a man to arise in me,  
That the man I am may cease  
to be!"

The point holds for the larger scene. Herod's troubled mind and heart give me yet one reason more to believe that evil is a usurper. It is real alright! We must not go the Christian Science route by denying its reality. No amount of positive or negative thinking can wash it out of existence. The Scriptures do not tell us that evil is unreal. They tell us that evil presently occupies a place that doesn't belong to it! Evil is always being judged and crowded by the pending order of another kingdom!

"The wicked are like the tossing sea;  
for it cannot rest." (Is. 57:20)

Whence the tossing and restlessness?

"The way of the transgressor is hard."  
(Pr. 13:15)

Whence the hardness?

"The stars in their courses fought against  
Sisera." (Judg. 5:20)

Whence the countering?

"Righteousness exalteth a nation but sin  
is a reproach to any people." (Pr. 14:34)

Whence the reproach?

"All flesh is grass, and all its beauty like  
the flower of the field. The grass  
withers, the flower fades." (Isa. 40:7,8)

Whence this withering and fading?

No lie can live forever. Evil is up against, in  
Daniel Williams' words, "God's unalterable will to re-  
deem."

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Christmas is more than a benign celebration of  
the beatific state of infancy. More than a tribute to  
the glamour of things simple. More than a harmless  
myth to be tolerated after the fashion of Little Red  
Riding Hood or Santa Claus.

Christmas means that the things that are are un-  
der threat by the things that are not. Christmas is a  
cloud the size of a child's hand that portends trouble  
for the kingdoms of this world as Herod rightly sensed.

"When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled  
and all Jerusalem with him." Herod or Christ? That's  
the choice isn't it? Force or love? Domination or  
service? The things that are or the things that are  
not....yet? From whence does your help come? From  
the cradle -- or the throne?



CLOSING PRAYER

*Gracious God, our Father, forgive us  
that we have allowed ourselves to be  
intimidated by the boisterous,  
clamorous powers of this present age.*

*Give us entrance into the kingdom of Christ,  
that even now in our less-than-perfect  
lives we may know the power of the age  
to come.*

*Through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

*Amen.*

FOOTNOTE:

1. Morris, Colin, The Hammer of the Lord,  
p. 15, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1974

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