

During the season of Advent, perhaps you recall hearing the famous quote, "Jesus is the Reason for the Season." Maybe you even saw similar words printed on car bumper stickers that declared something along the lines of: "Let's keep Christ in Christmas!" After all, it's a popular slogan, glimpsed on many a bumper or billboard. And practically every year followers of Jesus encourage their friends and acquaintances to say, "Merry Christmas" rather than "Season's Greetings" or "Happy Holidays."

I wonder though, do any of us really think there's a danger of losing Jesus amidst the wrapping paper and the wreaths? *Really?* Sure, a huge, commercial holiday has just rolled over us, and some might say that the retail industry has little to do with the babe in the manger. But isn't his place there pretty secure, also?

All over the country, children of church families have 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. 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!" while slamming a door for dramatic effect. Wise men may also show up bearing gifts -- or, we may not see them until Epiphany.

Yet, there's one figure from the biblical narrative you'll rarely see portrayed in a children's Christmas program: King Herod. He's just too mean and nasty for that holy night. And yet, with that being said, this morning we hear 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 the naïve foreigners in his presence could

be enlisted as spies to lead him to the prophesized King of the Jews, so much the better.

Thankfully, the visitors from the east aren't slackers in the intelligence department. They can see right through Herod's insincere hospitality. They return to their own country "by another way." But that is only Part 1, of a two-part story. Nobody ever wants to read Part 2, 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 little kids to hear in Sunday school or on Christmas Eve before heading back home to leave milk and cookies out for Santa. After all, while they lay nestled all snug in their beds visions of sugarplums could be replaced by bloody nightmares.

Herod, in our narrative for today, is enraged once he learns the magi have given him the slip. And so, 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 slaughter them. 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 our 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 contradictory note, struck in the closing bars of a beautiful melody. Up to this point, everything has been all sweetness and light. But then, the fists of Herod's soldiers are 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 -- at this point a bitter old man, in the final year of his 41-year reign -- was fully capable of playing a role in such atrocities. He was king in name only. Everyone knew that. It was the Romans who 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. Perhaps more.. He put one of his wives, Mariamne (Miram), on trial for adultery. Chief witness for the prosecution was Mariamne's own mother -- who, it's said, testified against her daughter only because she feared for her own life. Herod executed his wife, 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 that's still not all, wait, there's more.! After murdering his wife Herod later 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 the latest crown prince and put him on trial for treason like the others and had him executed. The emperor of Rome was so appalled by this 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 the Lord stood before him in chains, wearing a crown of thorns.

Getting back to our story for today, we don't know when it was, exactly, that the magi stopped by the palace to pay their courtesy call to King Herod, but it was probably during the last, turbulent year of his life, the year he executed his third son. Can any of us doubt, now, that this man was capable of dispatching soldiers to kill babies? Thankfully, Jesus, of course, as an infant escaped Herod's fateful plan. 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 a thriving Jewish quarter of Alexandria, a great center of learning. Its possible Jesus spent his early years in that place learning about the Talmud from the distinguished rabbis of the city.

Surely some of us find it troubling that God sends an angel to rescue Jesus, but let's 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 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 our takeaway for today? Should we reserve a role for Herod in next year's Sunday school Christmas program? Relax...It's a rhetorical question! 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 wonderful, a good, or a decent 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 the large number of desperate Ukrainian 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 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 kind of Christmas did they have this year?

Then there are those who are afflicted by poverty here in this land. Sure, lots of our neighbors "had themselves a merry little Christmas," but a great many more find themselves far removed from the vision of perfection and peace portrayed on so many sparkly, glittery 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 calm 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. As for us -- his Holiday-weary disciples -- we have a role in carrying out that mission, using the spiritual gifts he's given us, along with whatever material resources we have at our disposal. Perhaps if we strive to keep Herod in Christmas, while we remind people that you can't spell Christmas without Christ, maybe, just maybe, it will be a little easier to remember our mission to introduce others in this dark world to Jesus our savior, our Lord, and our Light. Thanks be to God. Amen.