

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

January 4, 2026

The Second Sunday after Christmas

Matthew 2:13-15,19-23

Jeremiah 31:7-14

Psalms 84

Ephesians 1:3-6,15-19

This week in our lectionary, we have three options for our Gospel reading. I originally decided to work with the second reading from Matthew but as I spent time with the text, I found that we really needed to include the first reading from Matthew to help us gain a more complete understanding of the Christmas story.

The first reading from Matthew 2:1-12 tells the familiar story of the Wise Men. King Herod hears about a child who has been born king of the Jews and becomes frightened so he consults the chief priests and scribes and the wise men to learn about this star that has appeared in Bethlehem.

We are then told that Herod tells the wise men to go and search for the child and report back when they find him. And we know that the wise men set out and eventually find Jesus. But they are warned in a dream not to return to Herod so they travel home by another road.

Now, if we stopped at verse 12, we could close this chapter of the Christmas story with all the feel good feelings. Jesus is saved from Herod's clutches and peace and love and harmony enter the world. However, this isn't a full picture of the times, times that were marked not by peace, love, and harmony but by dangerous and oppressive political and social systems. And if we are to seriously reflect on the impact Jesus' birth, we must understand the reality of the world he entered into.

Let's read a little farther, through verse 18...

*13 Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.' 14 Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, 15 and remained there until the death of Herod....*

*16 When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. 17 Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: 18 'A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.'*

Although we like to end our story at the manger, the reality was much more gruesome and hostile than A Charlie Brown Christmas would have us believe. The birth of Jesus came in the

midst of extreme violence and pain. It wasn't a pivotal point toward peace...at least not in the moment. It was a catalyst that drove paranoia, fear, and anger. There is no way I can ever imagine what those times must have been like. The world didn't change just because the Messiah had entered into it. In fact, it seems to have gotten worse.

Do you ever wonder what this time was like for folks like Mary and Joseph and Jesus?

Here was King Herod, a man driven by his own self-preservation, by the threat of losing power, and by his anger at any one who would not bow down to his rule. So hungry was he to have control that he ordered the killing of an untold number of human lives. We talk about Herod today as a monster.

Yet, at the same time that we quickly point to him as a monster, historians point out that he was also a ruler who made sure his kingdom was prosperous, important, and powerful. As Matt Skinner, Professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary points out,

*"Herod was no madman seething on his throne pulling the wings off butterflies. Many of his contemporaries saw him as a savior in his own right. Evil rarely presents itself as a beast with horns, fangs, and claws. Usually it dresses itself up in respectability. It burrows into systems that we rely on to keep our societies from spinning into chaos."*

In other words, the people needed Herod, or so they thought. Their security and prosperity were more important to them than the injustices taking place right under their noses. Skinner goes on to state an important consideration...

*"Evil rarely acts alone. Tyranny and arrogance can't exist in a vacuum. They demand accomplices. They survive because their enablers are also contributors....Herod was a savvy politician who knew how to use favoritism, brutality, deception, and arrogance to advance his ends. Those are the tools used by people who believe they will never be held accountable."*<sup>1</sup>

This was the reality of the times.

Herod wasn't going out killing children himself. He had people faithful to his purpose. Beholden to his power and promises. Willing to do egregious acts for the promise of their own self-preservation. Things were good...why rock the boat even if the things going on around you are immoral, incomprehensible, and unjust?

The fullness of the Christmas story asks us to enter into these hard truths. And one of those truths is this...

With great change comes great courage. Because the peace that Jesus promised wasn't going to come to fruition from the songs of angels or the twinkling of a star. It wasn't going to rise up

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/herod-too-is-the-reason-for-the-season>

against Herod and the atrocities of the day by thoughts and prayers. It was going to have to come from the people who were willing to not just honor Jesus but to follow Jesus...right into the midst of this brutal world that Herod had cultivated. And that was going to require a lot of personal risk and sacrifice.

Now the harder question...

How do we relate to this story today? Because this isn't a story to be left in Bethlehem and it's certainly not a story to be left in a quiet manger. It's a story that asks us to name the Herod of our time.

That might look like greed, power, arrogance, hatred, injustice, and fear. Qualities that exist in our world but also in our hearts. As we continue to praise the coming of the Messiah, maybe we also need to reflect on how we might still be holding Herod a little too close to home.

I want to suggest that the answer is right in front of us...with the courage of the wise men. The wise men who weren't concerned with simply keeping things the way they were. The wise men who had the courage to stand up to the abuse of power in their midst. The wise men who were willing to say - we can do better and we are willing to take the risk.

And to be sure...they didn't have to make that choice. They could have fallen right in line with what Herod had commanded of them. Yet, they chose blessing over brutality. Love and mercy over violence. Peace and justice over hate and anger. They did what was in their power to do and they traveled home by another way.

When they confidently turned their backs on Herod and turned towards Jesus, they put everything on the line. But they did it because they knew it was good and right and holy. Characteristics they didn't see in the world around them but they saw in Jesus.

Being courageous and faithful followers of Christ means standing up to the Herod within our society and also the Herod within our own hearts. It means bringing healing and restoration to that which is broken in the world. It means having the wisdom to discern when power has overcome peace. When greed has overcome mercy. When fear has overcome love.

That is when we don't let the manger be the last word of the story. We let begin the story. A story of courage and faith that leads us to take a different way home.