A Tale Of Two Kings

Matthew 2:1-10
1 Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judæa in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem,
2 Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him.
3 When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.
4 And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born.
5 And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judæa: for thus it is written by the prophet,
6 And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel.
7 Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared.
8 And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also.
9 When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was.
10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.

• What is your favorite Christmas Movie?
  o A Charlie Brown Christmas?
  o Miracle on 34th Street?
  o A Christmas Story?
  o Scrooge?
  o Home Alone?
  o It’s A Wonderful Life?
  o Elf?
  o The Grinch That Stole Christmas?
    ▪ What do all these have in common???
    ▪ They all have make-believe characters!

• This is the Christmas season.
  o Many of you have already been posting pictures of your
Christmas decorations, most of you already have Christmas trees, and your hearts are full -- and everyone’s happy, right?
- No, there’s one man who isn’t happy about Christmas.
- In fact, he’s pretty angry about the whole thing.

- Only he’s not a make-believe character.
  - He’s for real.
  - He hates Christmas . . . and he’s never even heard the word.
  - He’s the man history calls Herod the Great.
  - His story is told in Matthew 2.

- Born into a politically well-connected family, Herod was destined for a life of hardball and power brokering.
  - At 25 years old, he was named the governor of Galilee, a high position for such a young man.
  - The Romans were hoping that Herod could control the Jews who lived in that area.
  - In 40 B.C. the Roman Senate named him “King of the Jews.”
    - It was a title the Jews hated because he was anything but religious.

- Herod was the embodiment of the ultimate villain.
- He exhibited 4 classic characteristics:

1. **Preoccupation with Power.**

   - Herod was addicted to power.
     - Power has been described as the ultimate human obsession.
     - If it were an alcoholic beverage, Herod was passed out on the floor drunk with it.
     - The Bible links power, more often than not, to something we call sin.
     - If power is defined as the ability to control resources in order to secure one’s own destiny, then Herod was the epitome of power.

   - His life, and his use of power, can be summed up in three words -- he was **capable, crafty, and cruel.**
• Herod was extremely capable in what he was asked to do.
  o Soon after becoming King, he wiped out several bands of guerrillas who were terrorizing the countryside and used subtle diplomacy to make peace accords with many competing factions -- he probably could have brought peace to the Middle East!

• In addition to being capable, Herod was also very crafty.
  o He arranged all his relationships as conduits for power -- it was one thing he could never get enough of.

• His craftiness had no barriers.
  o Because he had a morbid distrust of anyone who might aspire to take his throne, he was also known as a cruel man.
  o He held tightly to the reins of power and brutally removed anyone who got in his way.
  o Over the years he killed many people:
    ▪ His brother-in-law…
    ▪ His mother-in-law…
    ▪ Two of his sons…
    ▪ And even his wife

• You see, above everything else, Herod the Great was a cruel killer.
  o That was his nature.
  o He murdered out of spite and he killed to stay in power.
  o Human life meant nothing to him.
  o The great historian Josephus called him “barbaric.”
  o Another writer has dubbed him “the male violent maniac.”

• The intensity of Herod’s cruelty grew in direct proportion to the amount of power he possessed.
  o At least we can say that he lived a consistent life.

2. Preoccupation with Possessions.

• Herod wanted it all.
  o He wanted everything a Roman Caesar had.
  o With the knack of a Donald Trump, Herod built 7 palaces and 7 theaters - one of which seated 9,500 people.
o He even built stadiums for sporting events - the largest could seat 300,000 fans!
o He even constructed a new temple for the Jews.

3. **Preoccupation with Prestige.**

- Herod loved to make an impression on others.
  - He built entire cities with state of the art architecture and amenities and named them after his superiors.
  - He was also a smooth talker and had a special ability to win over his opponents.
  - Several of his 10 marriages were prestige-oriented and politically motivated.
  - He once married the daughter of his leading rival in order to gain prestige and power.

4. **Preoccupation with Paranoia.**

- Ever since an enemy poisoned Herod’s father, who was a king himself, Herod was beset with paranoia.
  - He went to great lengths to make sure a secret ingredient never ended up in his soup.
  - When he became king, he commissioned tens of thousands of slaves to build over 10 emergency fortresses, all heavily armed and well provisioned.
  - In addition, he established an elaborate network of spies.
  - Anyone with a plot to dethrone Herod was sniffed out and eliminated before he could eat breakfast.
  - Those who opposed him would be invited to a midnight swim in the Jordan River with a cement bathrobe on.

- He ruled for more than 40 years -- until he clashed with another King -- one who was also called, The King of the Jews.

**Herod gets All Shook Up**

- Now, with that as background, let’s fast-forward to the final months of Herod’s life.
  - Herod the Great, King of the Jews, is slowly dying of a disease.
  - His body racked with convulsions, his breath foul, his skin covered with open sores, he’s rapidly losing his mind.
But he is still the King.
And then, one day word comes to him in Jerusalem that some visitors have arrived from the East.

These were strange men . . . with a strange question.
For our purposes this morning, all you need to know is that these stargazers had an interview with Herod.
They then asked him a question that shook him to his core in Matthew 2:2: “Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.”

They were looking for someone who was born King of the Jews.
Herod was probably thinking, “What’s up with that?”
Herod was the King of the Jews.
But he wasn’t born a King.
He had to fight and kill to gain that title.
What were these men talking about?
Why didn’t his spies tell him about this threat to his throne?

Matthew 2:3 says, “When Herod heard this he was disturbed and all Jerusalem with him.”
The word “disturbed” means to shake violently.
And no wonder.
He had finally subdued his enemies.
He had killed all his foes and was ready to die triumphantly.
Now these strangers come with their strange question.
No time to rest now.
One more person to kill - a young boy who claims to be King.
No wonder the Bible says that all of Jerusalem was shaken -- no one knew what this wacko would do next.

Now, even though Herod is old, remember the three words that define him -- he was capable, crafty, and cruel.
He knew that somewhere in the ancient oracles was a prediction of the exact place where the Messiah, or special one of God, was to be born.
So he called together all the ministers and religious leaders to find out if the Bible had anything to say about a coming King.
Specifically, he wanted to know where He was supposed to be
born.

- Without having to think much about it, they responded in Matthew 2:5-6: “In Bethlehem in Judea, for this is what the prophet has written: And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.”

- Herod winces when he hears the word, ruler.
  - Suddenly things are getting serious.
  - Maybe these strangers are on to something.
  - What if the boy they are looking for is the One the Bible predicted would come?
  - He must take Him out - now.

**Dumb and Dumber**

- So Herod called the stargazers secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared.
  - He sent them to Bethlehem and said in verses 7-8, “Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.”

- Off they went.
  - The star that led them over 800 miles through the desert miraculously reappeared and led them to the exact house Jesus was in.
  - When they found Jesus they bowed down and worshipped him, offering him expensive gifts.

- By the way, this event happened much later that what our Christmas cards and Nativity Scenes depict.
  - The wise men did not arrive the very night Jesus was born - their trip across the desert would have taken many months.
  - Verse 9 says that the star stopped over the place where the child was.
  - This word is used for a toddler, not a newborn baby.
  - Also, verse 10 mentions that they came to the house where the child Jesus was - there’s no mention of the stable or manger here - Jesus and his parents were in someone’s home when the wise guys showed up.
I guess we can just use some white-out on our Christmas cards and write a letter to Hallmark!

• The mysterious men from the east knew something Herod would never know -- that the little boy in a tiny house would someday rule the world.
  o They were not ashamed to give him gifts fit for a King.

• Just before the wise men step off center stage and drift into the twilight of history, we are told one last fact about them in verse 12: “Having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their own country by another route.”

The Butcher of Bethlehem
• Realizing that he has been tricked, Herod wigs out.
  o Remember that he is a bloodthirsty killer by nature.
  o All the worst instincts of a lifetime of cruelty now come to the surface.

• Keep this in mind because it’s the only way you can understand what is about to happen.
  o When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the wise men, he was furious and did something worthy of Hitler or Stalin or Saddam Hussein.
  o He ordered the cold-blooded murder of all males less than two years of age.
  o Herod the Great had become the Butcher of Bethlehem.

• Rarely in history was a battle between Kings so dismally stacked.
  o Herod the capable, crafty, and cruel dictator filled with power, possessions, prestige, and paranoia, armed with firepower, resources and armies -- and little Jesus, held safely in the arms of his loving mother.

Sudden Impact
• To say that the two Kings, Herod and Jesus, merely “crossed paths” is way too mild.
  o According to a fundamental law of physics, the force of impact depends upon speed and direction.
Jesus and Herod were both moving fast, but from totally opposite directions.

- King Herod represented the popular perspective on power: **Get it, keep it, use it.**
- King Jesus had a more simple, yet radical philosophy: **Use power to serve others.**

- No wonder the two kings clashed.
  - They both possessed immense power, but how they chose to use it revealed the hearts of two radically different men.
    - One was a tyrant, the other a servant.
    - One was consumed with self-interest, the other focused on pleasing God and serving others.
    - One manipulated, slandered, deceived, and coerced; the other healed, touched, taught, and loved.

**Herod in Us**

- Herod the Great was perhaps the ultimate oxymoron in history.
  - Rich in what most of us consider valuable, he was totally bankrupt as a human being.
  - He was addicted to power, obsessed with possessions, focused on prestige, and filled with paranoia.

- In order to fully understand the opposite paths of Herod and Jesus, let’s take a look at the end of the story.
  - Herod, with all his wealth and power, came to ruin.
    - In the final year of his life, his body was infected with disease; his pain was so bad that he often screamed throughout the night.

- Jesus, after a life of poverty and lowly position, descended yet further -- to a rough-hewn wooden cross.
  - His cries, like Herod’s, also pierced the night.
  - By completely yielding His power, He also died.
  - But there was a critical difference -- Herod could not save himself from death; Jesus could have, but He chose not to.

- In life, Jesus willingly suffered…
  - From the abuse by religious leaders…
o From the ignorance, hard-heartedness, and rejection of many people…
o From the constant threats to His life…
o From the betrayals of friends, the beatings, and His death on our behalf…
  ▪ All for a single purpose:
    • To demonstrate God’s outrageous love.
    • While Herod wielded the power of hate and self-protection, forming armies, building fortresses and killing at will, Jesus wielded the power of liberating love.

• Let’s be honest about something.
o If you and I take a hard look inside, we will see little Herod’s staring back at us.
o Given the right situation, every one of us is capable of working a little of Herod’s magic -- especially if it helps us get what we want.
o I know there’s still some Herod kicking around inside of me.
  ▪ He comes out when I would rather rule, than serve…
  ▪ He comes out when I focus on what I own or what I want to buy rather than on what I can give…
  ▪ He comes out when I’d rather be honored, than look for ways to honor others…
  ▪ He comes out when I see others as a threat instead of as people who matter to God.

Taking Your Temperature
• I’d like us to take a little assessment to see how we’re doing this morning.
• Let me ask you some questions.
o Which King is ruling your life right now?
o Are you infected with the virus of self-promotion and craftiness this Christmas?
o Do you think more about yourself than others?
o Do you crave power and the adrenaline rush that comes from controlling your own resources and controlling the people around you?
o Are you more afraid of what others may do to you instead of
If you can serve them?

• If so, then the influence of Herod may be sitting behind the control board of your life.

• On a scale of 1-10, how important are these things to you this Christmas?
• Let’s go ahead and take this little test.

1. **Power** - how important is it for you to have control?
0----1----2----3----4----5----6----7----8----9----10

2. **Possessions** - how important are the things you own?
0----1----2----3----4----5----6----7----8----9----10

3. **Prestige** - how important is status to you?
0----1----2----3----4----5----6----7----8----9----10

4. **Paranoia** - how important is your protection from others?
0----1----2----3----4----5----6----7----8----9----10

• If you scored at a 7 or above on any of these questions, you’ve probably got more of Herod in you than you thought - and you’re probably creating some problems for those closest to you.

**Which King Are You Following?**

• Herod the King and Jesus the King still clash today.
  • In fact, they compete with each other for control of our lives.
  • I like how the old Bob Dylan song puts it: You gotta serve somebody.

• Herod stated that he wanted to go and worship Jesus.
  • It strikes me that Herod was in no way interested in bowing down to another King -- even though he said he was.
  • Are you a little like Herod in this regard?
  • Do you say that you’re interested in Christ, but you’re really
not deep down inside?
  - Are you just going through the motions?

- There are at least two things you can do to help root out the influence of Herod in your life:

1. Give your Life to Jesus.

- Romans 12:1, “I urge you brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God - which is your spiritual worship.”

- When you give your entire life over to Jesus Christ, this ultimate demonstration of worship is very pleasing to God - and we drive a stake into the heart of Herod’s influence in our life.
  - Power loses its grip because we’ve humbly deferred to the King of Kings.
  - Possessions are not ours, they belong to God.
    - We are merely managers of what He’s given.
  - Prestige has no pull, because we are living to please God.
  - Paranoia flies out the window because when God is for us, who can be against us?

- Herod refused to make the 5-mile trip from Jerusalem to Bethlehem to worship the King of Christmas.
  - He was content to keep his distance.
  - He didn’t want to go and have his own kingship challenged.
  - He was so close -- and yet so far away.

- I suspect that some of you are close to understanding the true meaning of Christmas as well.
  - I encourage you to take the trip.
  - As you do, you’ll come face-to-face with a powerful demonstration of God’s outrageous love.
  - You’ll find a love that can liberate you.
  - And, as you search for Jesus, you’ll find in Him all that you are looking for.
• You gotta serve somebody.
  o Who will it be?
  o You see, once you transfer ownership of your life from the
    influence of Herod the Scrooge, to the Christ of Christmas, you
    will experience freedom from sin and selfishness.
  o With the Ultimate Ruler leading the direction of your life, you
    can be transformed from a Grinch who focuses only on getting,
    to a Giver who puts God and others first.

2. Give to the Least of these this Christmas.

• Many years after Jesus was born, He taught His followers an
  important lesson on how they could honor Him.
• In one of the most riveting and hard-hitting passages in all of
  Scripture, Jesus said in Matthew 25:40, “...Whatever you did for one
  of the least of these...you did it unto me.”

• In essence, Jesus is saying that if we want to worship and honor Him,
  then we better do some things for the forgotten people of our society.
  o Those who are in prison.
  o Those who are hungry.
  o Widows.
  o Orphans.
  o Those in Nursing Homes.
  o When we serve people like this, we are actually serving the
    Christ of Christmas.

• Here’s a practical thing you could do this holiday season.
  o Why not decide right now to participate in our giving tree?
    ▪ This is a program where you can give and we will help
      people right here in our church as well as helping start
      churches in North America – so they in turn can help
      others – kind of a Pay it Forward thing.
  o You might even want to decide as a family to give a couple
    fewer gifts to each other this year so that you can have the
    money to purchase a present for someone less fortunate.

A Letter from Jesus
• I want to close this morning by reading a something I ran across this
week.

Ruth went to her mailbox one day and found a letter. It had no stamp, and no postmark - just her name and address. This is what it said:

Dear Ruth,

I’m going to be in your neighborhood Saturday afternoon and I’d like to stop by for a visit.

Love Always,

Jesus

• Her hands were shaking as she placed the letter on the table. “Why would the Lord want to visit me? I’m nobody special. I don’t have anything to offer.” With that thought, Ruth remembered her empty kitchen cabinets. “I’ll have to run down to the store and buy something for dinner.”

• She reached for her purse and counted out its contents. Five dollars and forty cents. “Well, I can get some bread and cold cuts, at least.” After buying a few things at the store, Ruth started walking home quickly.

• “Hey lady, can you help us, lady?” Ruth had been so absorbed in her dinner plans, that she hadn’t even noticed two figures huddled in the alleyway. A man and a woman, both of them dressed in little more than rags. “Look lady, I ain’t got a job, ya know, and my wife and I have been living out here on the street, and, well, now it’s getting cold and we’re getting kinda hungry and, well, if you could help us, lady, we’d really appreciate it.”

• Ruth looked at both of them. They were dirty and they smelled bad. “Sir, I’d like to help you, but I’m a poor woman myself. All I have is some meat and some bread, and I’m having an important guest for dinner tonight and I was planning on serving that to Him.”

• “Yeah, well, okay lady, I understand. Thanks anyway.” The man put his arm around his wife’s shoulders and headed back into the alley.

• As she watched them leave, Ruth felt a familiar twinge in her heart. “Sir, wait!” The couple stopped and turned as she ran down the alley
after them. “Look, why don’t you take this food. I’ll figure out something else to serve my guest.”

• She handed the man her grocery bag. “Thank you lady. Thank you very much!” “Yes, thank you!” It was the man’s wife, and Ruth could see now that she was shivering.

• Ruth then replied tenderly, “You know, I’ve got another coat at home. Here, why don’t you take this one?” Ruth unbuttoned her jacket and slipped it over the woman’s shoulders. Then smiling, she turned and walked back to the street...without her coat and with nothing to serve her guest. “Thank you lady! Thank you very much!”

• Ruth was chilled by the time she reached her front door, and worried too. The Lord was coming to visit and she didn’t have anything to offer Him. She fumbled through her purse for the door key.

• But as she did, she noticed another envelope in her mailbox. “That’s odd. The mailman doesn’t usually come twice in one day.” She took the letter out of the box and opened it.

Dear Ruth,

It was so good to see you again. Thank you for the lovely meal. And thank you, too, for the beautiful coat.

Love Always,

Jesus

• The air was still cold, but even without her coat, Ruth no longer noticed.

CLOSING

• We can be changed this Christmas by giving our life to Jesus and by giving to the least of these.

• Later, in Matthew 26, Jesus sat down to have a meal with his followers.
  o He wanted to eat with them, and to talk with them.
  o But more importantly, He wanted to prepare them for what was coming - His death on their behalf.
  o It wasn’t a very big meal - not at all like our Thanksgiving Turkeys or our Christmas Hams.
- Their plates were not overflowing.

- When you think about it, most of us already have plates filled with good things this morning.
  - And yet, with all the things filling our lives, many of us are still unfulfilled.

- Maybe life to you feels like an all-you-can-eat buffet, which looks good as you’re going through the serving line, but by the time you’re finished, everything has lost its taste.
  - And instead of feeling satisfied, you feel bloated.

- We can’t savor a supper with Jesus if we’re stuffed.
  - This morning, may I encourage you to slow down enough to taste the goodness of God?

- When it came to the management of power, there was only one thing King Herod and King Jesus shared in common: They both believed there was nothing that bloodshed couldn’t cure.