

LESSONS IN LIVING

Christmas and the 7 Secrets of Life *Part VI: Life is Unconquerable*

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby
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Scripture Reading: Matthew 2:16-18 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

It's understandable why Christians have wanted to take Herod out of the Christmas story, not so much at the beginning of Christianity, but after the church became established and powerful in its own right, Herod gets farmed out as does the darkness and the bleakness of the night, the poverty of this young couple, the questioned nature of the birth. Originally, those were very important parts of the Christmas story. The slaughter of the innocents is about as much of a downer as you can bring into the Christmas story, I would think. But, the important reason not to take it out is that what Christmas should be is something that lasts all through the year. And when we replace these kinds of stories with tinsel, more lighting, and a couple more figures in the manger, what we lose is the deep lesson that could last through the year, and really, throughout our lives.

The question that this text asks us, a very haunting question, is why do the powerful always seem to get away with it? Why do the weak have to pay for the sins of the strong? But it also asks us to kind of reframe the question. Because if you look at the story, if you look at the symbol of the nativity, the people in the manger, even though they're haunted and hunted, are absolutely at peace, and Herod, who is one of the most powerful figures of all time, is terrified. There's a lesson there that will help us understand why violence and power are not the way to go. But we have to leave Herod in the story to get this message.

So, the first question that pops in the mind is "why is Herod so afraid?" He's got all the cards. He built some of the most impregnable fortresses of the ancient world. Have you ever heard of Massada - that great cliff they thought was unscaleable? That was a hiding place for him if the people rose up. He had seven years supply of water, and I don't remember how much grain was there, but there was a lot there so that he and a small group of people could hold off the world, or so he thought. Why was Herod so afraid?

To update the question, and to make it something that will illumine our lives, we can ask the question, "Why are we so afraid?" Why is America, as a nation, so afraid of the rest of the world? We spend as much money on defense as the rest of the nations of the world put together. We've got some of the deadliest weapons of all time, and we've shown we're willing to use them. Why are we still terrified of the rest of the world? Why does it seem that the more powerful we get, the more haunted we are, the more frightened we are. So, if you want to make this about Herod, you can do that, but if you want to understand today, then we hold those two symbols together.

Herod was very rich, very powerful, and the tendency for human beings is to think that you're the adult and the rest of the world are children, and you're taking care of them. And the violence you have to

commit is seen as collateral damage, in keeping yourself absolutely and completely safe. The irony is you feel like the whole world belongs to you – as Herod – I’m not talking about you personally. Although, as a nation, we do feel that way, don’t we? We’re in other people’s countries. They resist us and we call it insurgents – very interesting. They’re militants, we’re soldiers. We have what we call “defensive strikes” as though that wasn’t a contradiction in terms. But, if you think the whole world belongs to you, then it’s understandable that you would feel that whatever you have to do to stay in control is actually a gift to the people that you’re hurting, because they can’t make the decisions themselves, they can’t control their own lives. So this is something politically that has a lot of ramifications. It also has a lot of ramifications personally. Have you ever known or been somebody who tried to control the relationships around you so much that nobody wanted to be with you? It’s a self-fulfilling prophecy. You didn’t trust the relationships enough where people could leave if they needed to. There are people who are so intimidated inside themselves, they try to control everybody around them, and everything implodes from within.

So Herod is a symbol at the biggest level and the smallest level of how, sometimes, we treat ourselves. When the new is born into our life, when a new opportunity comes, there’s a fearful voice that tries to clamp down on it. Do you remember when you were a teenager (if you’ve arrived there, yet) and you started being yourself, or you were trying to find out who you were, and the people that up to that point had loved and nourished you, all of a sudden, were terrified that you might blossom in the wrong way? Some of you may be in that situation right now. It’s very hard.

So Herod represents that part of us that tries to hold on to life and keep it from changing – the conservative part of ourselves. The astrologers, or the magi, represent the liberal part of ourselves – the kind of airy-fairy part of our selves that’s just going to follow a star. Have you ever tried to follow a star, by the way? Tied to stand right under a star and have it lead you to a barn? (laughter) It’s a bit of a challenge. They [the liberal parts] are the parts of us that just want to get along with everybody. “Let’s just embrace and bring together” and their naivety almost leads Herod to the baby. But that continuum of conservative/liberal is really superficial to me. And in these stories, you see that neither one of those is the right choice. You can’t hold on to the past, but you can’t un-tether from the challenges of your time, either. Have you ever heard liberals say “speak the truth to power”? Because obviously, these people just don’t understand, and we’re just going to go give them a message and they’ll know to lay their power down. What Noam Chomsky says is the powerful already know. What WikiLeaks has shown is that they already know. We’re the ones that don’t know because the information is kept from us.

But what’s being said here – you’ve got the baby in the middle of it. The baby in the middle of the story doesn’t fit either one of those polarities. Whenever we can look at the world and get it into two categories, it means we’ve lost our bearing. When you’ve got it down to the inside - the outside group, whatever that is, it’s sort of a sign of our instabilities. The baby doesn’t fit in any category. There’s no chain of questions that you could check off with this baby. It can’t talk, and yet we’re learning something from the baby. It can’t do anything, and yet that part of us that wants to respond to protect the infant tells us exactly what to do.

When we look at the children of the world...if we look at the children of the world, we would know what to do about things like the economy, global warming, and all of that. We would, because we would want to protect them. But there’s a part of us that’s so afraid of losing something, and we don’t even know what that is, that we, in a sense, betray the children of the world.

Howard Thurman was one of the great, prophetic leaders of the black church in America, and he said something really wonderful. He was very inspirational for Dr. King. He said, “When you look at the world, don’t ask what does the world needs, ask what brings you to life, what gives you life, and then go

do that.” Because what the world needs, he said, are people that are fully alive.

The infant in the manger represents life itself, represents humanity itself, and until we realize that’s where our true worth comes from – not from what we own, not from what we control - we feel a terror at life itself, at change itself. There’s something about coming to our naked humanity that gives a sense of peace that’s different from the rest of the world. Albert Einstein used to say, “Remember your humanity and forget the rest.” When you don’t know what else to do, when the situations are so complicated, remember your humanity and forget the rest. Just to get your bearing, put your nation to the side, put your religion to the side long enough to hear your own human heart, and then you will know what to do.

And what you realize in this story is that Herod is already being punished. When you ask the question, “Why do the powerful, the bullies of the world, get away with it?” they don’t. What we learn in the Christmas story is *the sin is the punishment*. Herod cannot be fully human. Herod cannot feel the kind of intimacy that this poor young family of immigrants feels. In order to get up that high on the pecking order, everything that’s human and compassionate and decent has to be put to sleep. So we never need to envy those who are powerful and rich. Let me ask you this: if you could trade places with Herod, would you? If you could trade places with the rich and powerful and brutal, would you? It might be tempting. How many of you have Herod as a figure in your manger scene? (laughter) But, he’s the symbol of success and power, and glory, and all those things, and there’s no place there for this because this is coming from a deeper place – a place of trust of life, a place of trust of change.

In Taoism, they say the soft overcomes the hard...even though it takes 10,000 years. Water wears down a mountain even though it takes 10,000 years. Gentleness and kindness overcome violence though it takes 10,000 years. So the lesson of the manger and the reason that Herod was afraid, and the reason we are afraid is because we don’t trust life itself. We’ve chosen substitutes of life to make us feel safe and they don’t work. Life is the only power in the universe for us. If we trust it in times of change and in times of danger, then there is a peace there that nothing in the world can take away. When we surrender that to buffer ourselves artificially with violent weapons or wealth and mansions that separate us from our human brothers and sisters, we become more and more isolated and more and more afraid.

So, I think it’s very important to keep Herod in the Christmas story. It may be a bit of a bummer this close to Christmas, but the reason it’s there is so that we can remember that the peace comes within the storm. When you go out this week there probably won’t be angels sitting on your roof, singing “Peace on earth, good will to all”, but if you understand the symbol, you will know that the song is being sung and that you’re invited to sing the song and take that song out to the world. And we learn it from the story of a helpless infant and a powerful king who was terrified of that child. The child has nothing to say yet, and yet it teaches us everything. It says “Come back to your humanity. Come back to your life and trust it.” When you don’t know what else to do for the world, ask the question, “What brings you to life?” Do that. For what the world needs most is human beings who have come to life.

Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew’s Sermon Transcription Project.

Christmas and the 7 Secrets of Life Series

Part I: Life Grows Out of Death, Isaiah 11:1-9 (November 28)

Part II: Life is a Polarity, Isaiah 7:10-17 (December 5)

Part III: Life is Pattern, John 1:1-5 (December 12)

Part IV: Life isn’t What Happens to You, Matthew 1:18-23 (December 19)

Part V: Life is What We Give Back, Luke 2:1-7 (December 24)

Part VI: Life is Unconquerable, Matthew 2:16-18 (December 26)

Part VII: Everything is Connected, Matthew 2:1-12 (January 2)

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By calling ourselves progressive, we mean that we are Christians who...

- Have found an approach to God through the life and teachings of Jesus,
- Recognize the faithfulness of other people who have other names for the way to God's realm, and acknowledge that their ways are true for them, as our ways are true for us,
- Understand the sharing of bread and wine in Jesus' name to be a representation of an ancient vision of God's feast for all peoples,
- Invite all people to participate in our community and worship life without insisting that they become like us in order to be acceptable, including, but not limited to:
 - believers and agnostics,
 - conventional Christians and questioning skeptics
 - women and men,
 - those of all sexual orientations and gender identities,
 - those of all races and cultures,
 - those of all classes and abilities,
 - those who hope for a better world and those who have lost hope;
- Know that the way we behave toward one another and toward other people is the fullest expression of what we believe,
- Find more grace in the search for understanding than we do in dogmatic certainty – more value in questioning than in absolutes,
- Form ourselves into communities dedicated to equipping one another for the work we feel called to do:
 - striving for peace and justice among all people,
 - protecting and restoring the integrity of all God's creation, and
 - bringing hope to those Jesus called the least of his sisters and brothers,
- Recognize that being followers of Jesus is costly, and entails love, conscientious resistance to evil, and renunciation of privilege.

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