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Sermon Series: *Advent's Adverbs, No. 3*

**Angrily**

December 18, 2022

**Matthew 2:1-12 (NIV)**

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem<sup>2</sup> and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

<sup>3</sup> When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. <sup>4</sup> When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. <sup>5</sup> "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

<sup>6</sup> "But 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 shepherd my people Israel."

<sup>7</sup> Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup> He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

<sup>9</sup> After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. <sup>10</sup> When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. <sup>11</sup> On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. <sup>12</sup> And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

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We're in Matthew, Chapter 2 today.

Through this season of Advent – the time of waiting for Jesus' arrival – we've seen how, all through the ages, different people have waited for the Savior in very different ways.

A couple of weeks ago, we discovered the great good that can come from waiting *patiently* for the Lord – ironically by studying the great destruction that came from King Ahaz' *impatient* insistence upon saving himself.

Last Sunday, we saw the blessing of the way Mary waited *humbly* for the Lord and His arrival.

Today? Today's a little different because we're looking at someone who waited for the Messiah *angrily*.

Of course, I'm talking about King Herod.

Now, I realize this is not the typical Sunday-before-Christmas Scripture text or theme. Not only are we jumping ahead in the story here, but, are we really going to talk about *anger* a week before Christmas?

Yes, we are, which may seem strange, but the reality is that Herod's anger toward Jesus is shared by many in our day today.

Jesus has a way of making people angry.

Now you say, "Oh, but not at Christmas! Not at His birth! Jesus was just a little baby. How could He make people angry?"

Ah, very, very easily, just as Herod shows us.

Now, it's helpful to know that "Herod" is actually a family name; there are six Herods either explicitly mentioned or alluded to in the New Testament. The one in today's text is the first. Known as Herod the Great, he ruled over Palestine from about 47 BC until his death in 4 BC.

In those days, of course, Israel was *not* an independent nation. It was ruled by Rome, but not easily so. This land and those people proved to be a constant source of trouble to Roman leaders.

Herod was part Jewish, but he was also a loyal Roman "operative," you might say, and this made him the perfect person, in Rome's opinion, to govern there. They thought that maybe someone like Herod could keep the peace, since he understood something about what they saw as the Jews "quirky religion."

That's why Rome made Herod governor.

And their plan proved effective. The fact is that Herod was a good leader in some respects. He was a tremendous builder; he was a shrewd politician; at times he was quite generous; and he wound up being, really, the *only* leader to succeed at keeping peace there.

So, in return for Herod's successes, he was permitted by Rome to carry the title, "King" or even "King of the Jews," which is why, as you might imagine, Herod became upset when these holy men from distant lands arrived in Jerusalem asking where the *new* "King of the Jews" had been born.

"What do you mean, 'new King of the Jews'?"

That's absolutely what Herod thought, though in his response to them, he managed to somewhat veil his shock and rage.

Now, this whole thing about the star and the signs and all of that: we tend to blow past that part pretty quickly, either because we're so familiar with it or because it seems ridiculously antiquated to us.

In reality though, this was the way most cultures in that day thought and lived and interpreted events. They recognized they were finite and so they looked for something beyond themselves and their world to help them find their way, and the skies and the stars seemed to be good options. Different cultures had worked out whole systems of interpretation of what they observed in the night skies.

It was all very real to them, and it was real enough to Herod, so much so that the Magi's question easily exposes Herod's arguably largest character flaw: he was, literally, insanely suspicious.

History suggests that even though he'd always been so, the older he got, unfortunately, the more suspicious he became, and also, the more reactionary and the more angry.

This is not just simple moodiness we see in Herod.

No.

Herod's anger caused him to murder his wife, his mother-in-law, and three of his own sons, fearing they were conspiring, in some way or another, to take away his crown.

It was that sort of behavior that caused Roman emperor Augustus to say, "It's safer to be Herod's pig than it is to be his son."

As Herod's own death drew near, he gave the order that a group of the most distinguished citizens of Jerusalem be arrested and imprisoned on false charges, and that at the moment he himself died, all of them were to be executed.

His reason?

So that there would be at least some mourning at the time of his death, since he knew that no one would shed tears for him.

Herod responded angrily to any threat to his throne, as we see in his attempt to kill Jesus, and failing that, his order to have all the little boys of Bethlehem put to death.

That was just the sort of person Herod had become.

Of course, Herod was far from the first to behave like this.

Thirteen hundred years or so before Herod, Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, did the very same thing when he felt *his* leadership and authority was threatened, and so have other world leaders: people like Hitler, Stalin and Mao, to name just a few.

What makes people do that? How can some people conclude that things like mass executions are acceptable?

It's hard to think about behaviors like this, and as Christians we struggle specifically with how mental illness and spiritual realities collide in these sorts of circumstances. Things can get muddy for some of us on this front.

On the one end, there are those who see behavior like Herod's as purely medical or physical, and their solution is to medicate or insist on therapy or counsel it into submission.

On the other end, there are people who see behavior like Herod's as purely spiritual: that the one and only answer is right relationship with God, and if the subject would just have more faith, they'd be able to overcome even these sorts of murderous temptations.

The truth, though, has to take both physical and spiritual into account.

The fact is that we live in a broken world, and in this broken world, until Jesus returns, people here are going to suffer with broken minds and emotions, just as we suffer with broken bodies.

There is a place for medications and therapies in mental and emotional illnesses, just as there's a place

for medicines and therapies to help cure cancers and heart issues and broken legs and weak eyes or ears.

At the same time, it is also true that, just as many physical ailments are caused or exacerbated by unhealthy and ungodly behaviors, many mental and emotional ailments are caused or exacerbated by unhealthy and ungodly spiritual behaviors.

Not always, but often, there are spiritual components to sicknesses of both mind and body, and we would be helped and healthier to recognize that.

Maybe, had Herod lived today, he would have qualified for a prescription for Xanax or Ativan – or maybe therapy or counseling would have been of some help to him.

We don't know, though I'd guess that his wife, his mother-in-law and three of his sons would have suggested he give it a try.

Something we know for sure, though, is that Herod did have a major spiritual problem: he was entirely unwilling to submit his life to God, and that absolutely played a huge role in his suspicious nature and his angry reactions.

Without doubt, Herod's first love, and it would seem his only love, was himself and his own good and welfare and privilege. With that as the sole basis of his worth, it makes complete sense that Herod's rage would be triggered by this news that someone else may well supplant him.

He saw a new king as one who would remove his very identity and existence, which was his only sense of worth, you see?

And let me say, this same sort of reaction can happen in anyone who places their identity in anything or anyone temporary or transitional. If we tie our worth to something – to anything temporary, our fight to protect it winds up being for us a fight for our very survival.

If you tie your worth and identity to another earthly person, you die when they die, and they do all die, because people and relationships come and go.

Everything of this world comes and goes.

Titles and honors come and go.

Wealth and material things come and go.

Health, talents, abilities: they all come and go.

Even we ourselves: our earthly lives come and go. And as long as we find our worth and our identity in any of those things, when faced with their loss, an angry protective reaction is our natural, carnal, earthly response.

That's why we have to take our identity – our self-worth – in something or someone eternal, someone who stands outside of earthly time and space and who lasts far longer than earthly life.

Herod's utter self-absorption and self-love: he was born with that. We all are born with that. That self-love, left unchecked in Herod's life, turned him into a horrifically suspicious, angry and threatened old man who lashed out at anyone who even seemed to challenge his personal sovereignty.

And his behavior here shows us that just as God can use, for *good*, people whose hearts are *open to Him*, so can the devil use people whose hearts are *closed to God* in hideously *evil, destructive* ways.

You see, the salvation that God offers us in Christ is far, far more than just entrance into heaven upon our death.

Receiving Christ is receiving God's eternal perspective about who He is and who we are.

To receive Jesus — to *really receive Jesus* — means that we willingly admit that He is king, and that we are not.

To receive Jesus means that His will, and not our will, becomes the last word in our lives.

It means that we submit ourselves to His timing and His purposes, and we no longer insist upon our own.

Receiving Jesus is admitting, as the Apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6, that we are no longer our own. We no longer belong to ourselves, but rather we belong to God, who bought us with Christ's life and death.

So that God has the final say in our lives and choices.

If God wants us to be king, then so be it. But if God chooses to set us aside so that another might be king, then that's fine too.

Whatever God wants, that's what we want:

- whether or not we especially like it,
- whether or not it's particularly pleasant,
- whether or not we even understand it.

That's what it means to trust God and live by faith in Him.

Herod knew that this baby boy was going to interfere with his life and place and power and influence, and so his first instinct was to destroy Him, and people are very quick to condemn Herod as some freakishly, reprehensible maniac.

But as theologian Douglass Hare writes, "Scoff not at Herod until you deal with the Herod within you."

You say, "Ah, but I'd never do anything like Herod did!"

You may not think so today, but is there a part of you or me — is there some dark corner in our hearts somewhere — that still reacts violently to Jesus' kingship, to His authority, over us?

Because if there is, and if it's allowed to remain, it will grow, you see. It will grow and it will spread, and there is no telling what that dark place of rebellion will be capable of in the years to come.

Does that sound like a warning? It's supposed to.

Whatever we permit to exist within us, both the holy and the profane, has potential for a future that we can never completely predict today.

We are never just standing still. We are always moving either closer to God or further away from Him. In our thoughts, in our habits, with our every choice, we are working either *with* God's Spirit or

against Him; we are always helping along either the *purification* or the *putrification* of our hearts.

As we embrace God, He will make us beautiful on the inside.

But if we resist God long enough — if we push back at His kingship long enough — any one of us can absolutely wind up right here with Herod.

So let me ask: is there a deep-seated anger within you?

Oh, you're not like Herod, at least not yet, because you're still able to hide it — most of the time — from most people anyway.

But you know it's there. And so does God.

Are you angry because life hasn't turned out the way you thought it would — the way you wanted?

Are you angry that you lost this role or that title or this position or that wealth?

Does it make you angry that God does not seem to be giving in to your wants and wishes and decisions?

Does even hearing the words, "You're not in charge," make you mad deep within?

If so, please, take a good, long look at Herod and realize that that anger in you has the potential to destroy both you and those around you, if you don't deal with it.

Look, all the people of Jerusalem were holding their breath because they knew Herod: they knew his anger, and they knew that his reaction would be awful.

Deep-seated anger has the potential to destroy so much if it's left undealt with.

God wants to know: will you deal with it today?

This Christmas could be the best — the most liberated — you've ever known.

Will you deal with that place of anger within you?

Now, you may well need to see a doctor or a counselor about it somewhere along the way. I can't write you a prescription for that.

But first things first here: have you really — really — received Jesus as the unchallenged, unrivaled king of your life? That has to come first.

Have you taken your identity, not in yourself or your stuff, but only in Christ?

That absolutely is the first step in *not* becoming a Herod.

Let Jesus be not just your eternal savior, but your present, earthly King.

Turn the details — the concerns, the worries of life, and that dark corner of anger and resistance in your heart — all over to Him.

Let Him save you from those things and all the destruction they can bring.

He'll do it today if you'll stop angrily resisting Him and instead welcome Him — if you'll let Him be your king — as the King that He was born to be.

Will you?

All around the world today there are people who would gladly destroy Jesus because they see in Him the one who interferes with their lives.

Simply put, they want to do what they like, and Jesus will not let them do what they like, so they would kill Him if they could.

True Christ-followers no longer do what they like. They dedicate their lives to doing as Jesus likes.

Are you truly following Jesus today?

Will you welcome Him as your king?

Prayer:

Lord, our prayer is simply that you'd make us like you – slow to anger, filled with love, forgiving others as you've forgiven us.

Help me, Lord, to do this today.

In Jesus' name. Amen.

Closing Song: *Jesus Is the Lord of All*

Benediction:

It's been said that in the days of the empire, no Roman ruler could tolerate a rival. One or the other would be snuffed out.

Interestingly, the same is true of Jesus. He'll never be satisfied being a co-regent with us. He wants all of us, but not for the sake of His own ego or for our diminishment. He wants all of us so that He can give us all of Him – so we can live the lives God made us to live, the very best lives possible.

He wants all of us: to save us from ourselves, to save us from loving ourselves to death, as Herod did.

This Christmas, if you've not yet done this, you can give a gift that benefits you and everyone around you. Give your whole self to Jesus.

Last week's giving statement said it: "However we offer our tithes and offerings to the Lord today, let's also offer ourselves to Him again, so He has the freedom to do whatever He'd like, both in us and through us. Believe it or not, the Christmas gift Jesus really wants from us is our whole selves."