

Sunday, December 25, 2011
Orinda Community Church UCC
A Sermon by the Rev. Frank Baldwin

KING HEROD'S STORY

MATTHEW 2:1-12

The astonishing narrative that I am about to share with you was first brought to light during the 1924 archeological expedition to Caesarea, British Palestine, conducted by the legendary Seymour Austin-Healey, the 13th Duke of Earl. An avid amateur historian, the Duke was searching for the famous lost tomb of Herod the Great, king of the Jews at the time when Jesus was born in Bethlehem. While this story has been neither confirmed nor denied by forensic archeology, I am pleased to present it to you in the spirit of this great season when we celebrate the improbably but undeniable mystery of Christ's coming.

King Herod's Story

“If you are trembling at the mention of my name: ‘King Herod,’ you may be calm yourself now. To avoid a visit from the torturer, it is customary when invoking my glorious self for commoners to prostrate themselves on the floor. If you have not done so, I can only surmise that you must be ignorant foreigners and aliens in my realm. Quite likely you are gentile, but do not let that overly concern you. Although I am the monarch of Judea and therefore the king of the Jews, I’m actually a foreigner myself, and just barely Jewish!

“I myself have heard those stories; of how the Christ was supposed to have been born in Judea during my reign; and even how I was allegedly responsible for the murder of a generation of two-year olds in Bethlehem. These tales are nothing but lies, vicious propaganda concocted by my miserable enemies! When I catch up with the author of this so-called “Gospel According to Matthew” who is responsible for spreading such outlandish mythology, I intend to have his fingers pulled apart at the knuckles and his tongue wrapped twice around his neck.

“Allow me to set the record straight: I am justifiably known and feared across the entire Roman Empire, not merely as ‘King Herod,’ but as ‘Herod the Great.’ I am the confidant of Caesars, the idol my jealous neighbors, rich, powerful and well-connected beyond compare. I am a brave and skillful leader in battle, a perfect marksman with either the javelin or the bow, a mighty hunter, a terrifying foe. As king I have expanded my realm, established order, eliminated crime (which is probably more than can be said of your government), commissioned vast public works, and won ten different wars. All it takes is a certain capacity for tyranny and ruthlessness which your lesser leaders are usually unable to stomach.

“Although I had to take this throne by outrageous treachery and stealth, I’ve managed to hold onto it for 36 years. If I do say so myself, I have been very adept at the kind of political maneuvering – including bribery and assassination – that is required to stay on top in today’s dog-eat-dog world. When Julius was Caesar I was his enthusiastic ally. When Caesar was murdered, I supported Cassias and Brutus, and then switched over to Antony. When Octavius got the upper hand in Rome and declared himself Caesar Augustus, I effortlessly became his best

friend and vassal in Judea. I foiled plots against my life by Cleopatra of Egypt, my religious and military advisors, and my own worthless family.

“And I must say in all modesty that I have made Judea into a showplace of Hellenistic culture. I have built theaters and amphitheaters, palaces and gardens as fine as any in the Roman world. I have introduced the most stylish and up-to-date imported clothing, furniture, customs and entertainment including gladiatorial combats, athletic events, and wild animals fighting to the death. I have loaded the capitol with handsome statues of Caesar and the various official gods and goddesses of the empire. I built an entirely new trade and resort city on the coast and named it Caesarea in honor of Augustus. The rich commercial and administrative classes have thrived under my rule; and when I ask my chosen advisors how I’m doing, they tell me I am wonderful.

“And in Jerusalem, to impress my Jewish citizens, I torn down the decrepit old Temple, leveled off the entire top of Mount Moriah and built a brilliant new Temple complex there. The entire area was redone in the fashionable Corinthian architectural style of white marble, elaborately carved. The doors of my Temple were 75 feet high and 24 feet wide; and I had the entire facade plated with gold so that you could see it from miles away. And as my own special embellishment, I placed a huge sculpture of the imperial eagle of Eternal Rome above the entrance as a nod to the mightiest power on earth, which made all this possible. It is my dubious honor, in the course of my official duties, to be a religious ruler; of awkward necessity, I am the king of the Jews. But let me tell you, so much of this God-talk is just talk. If there is a God in heaven, he is much more likely to be paying attention to people like Caesar, or me, than those pathetic priests with their noses in the scrolls of dead prophets and their congregations forever mumbling prayers and singing hopelessly out-of-date music.

“Regardless all I have done for them, my own citizens despise me. Yes, I know that; my spies are everywhere, and I have even taken to disguising myself to move unrecognized among the people listening for trouble-makers and identifying them for extermination. They whine endlessly about the taxation and conscription required to build these vast public works and maintain the kingdom in the style to which I am accustomed. They long for simpler, less sophisticated, less cultured times when they were weak but righteous, helpless but holy, poor but free. They pine for the old-fashioned faith of their legendary kings and prophets. They grumble about the way I came to the throne by violence and deceit; and complain about my lack of moral restraint and humanitarian values.

“A person in my position either lives by the sword or dies by the sword. It has been necessary for me to systematically eliminate all remaining representatives of the legitimate old regime, as well as the thousands who have plotted with them against me. And it is true that I have ruthlessly suppressed the religious establishment lest it rise up against me. I have found conspirators even among the sages of the Jews, and have taken steps to exterminate them. It is also true that I have been ten times married; and have fathered 15 universally-disappointing children. I felt compelled to assassinate the wife I loved best, and later, I even killed three of my most capable sons for plotting against me. Caesar himself once said he would rather be Herod’s pig than Herod’s son. I would say I have been unlucky in love.

“Behind my back, the people weep at their impoverishment and enslavement to Rome and loathe me for being Rome’s king, not theirs. Despite all the advantages I have brought them, they resent my being non-Judean in my birth and non-Jewish in my heart. So what? I will give them reason to hate and fear me! I have heard that they pray for this so-called Christ to come and deliver them. Ha! That sad, old, out-moded fairy tale. No one is going to deliver these people until a bigger, badder monarch than me comes on the scene, and so far, I don’t see him.

“There did come a time when my court was unexpectedly visited by a delegation of magi from the East: sorcerers or astrologers, I took them to be. ‘Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?’ they asked. I was flabbergasted, and sent a messenger out to my wives’ quarters to see if any of them had had another baby. But it turned out that these magi were looking for the Christ. Of course, I had no idea where the Christ was supposed to be born, and was reduced to having to ask my religious advisors to tell me. A man in my position does not have time to waste on the Bible. They looked at me in amazement, as if everyone should know the answer. I made a note to myself to have a few of them tortured who seemed to have more than a trace of a smirk on their faces. ‘At Bethlehem in Judea,’ was their reply.

“Go then, and search diligently for the child,” I counseled the magi; and away they went, following what they claimed to be a guiding star. But you must understand what was at stake here: I did not believe for even a moment that the Christ would be so foolish as to arise ‘at Bethlehem.’ His people would realize that Bethlehem is much too close to Jerusalem and the true seat of power, namely my throne. So, I sent spies to follow the magi and report back to me. I know exactly what happened in Bethlehem. I know all about the ridiculous parents and their peasant child. As I suspected all along, the real home of this back-water Christ is not Bethlehem, but Nazareth, where his father is a lowly carpenter. Oh, my secret police investigated very thoroughly, and had no difficulty extracting certain information from the innkeeper, and government census-taker, and a number of very frightened shepherds. I even know his name, “Jesus,” as common as dust. Some Christ he’ll turn out to be.

“Surprisingly, this pitiful infant “king of the Jews” slipped temporarily through my net. It is said that they are on their way to Egypt, and have plenty of resources for traveling, thanks to some valuable gifts from those dim-witted magi. But I will take no chances on him being still hidden somewhere in the neighborhood. I will find him, and I will punish Bethlehem. And if he has gotten out of the country, my agents will follow him, and my soldiers will be waiting when he returns.

“This deity in diapers is fighting something bigger than he can imagine: he is fighting me; and I am power and control and influence; I am mindless violence, terror and fear; I am oppression, intimidation and deceit; I am hatred, contempt and revenge; I am above questioning; I am beyond reproach; I am not accountable to anything or anyone except Caesar himself. I have a kingdom and a magnificent palace; he is a homeless refugee. I have armies and powerful friends; he has no one except his miserable parents by his side. *I am the king of the Jews, and he is nothing!* I am Herod the Great, a virtual god!

“I can promise you this: as long as I am in charge here, there will be no other king. Two thousand years from now, children will hear the name of King Herod the Great and still tremble

with loathing and fear. But no one – *no one* – will remember this Jesus of Nazareth..., Bethlehem..., whatever!

“I say you can forget about him!”