

**Let's Keep Herod in Christmas**  
**Isaiah 64:7-9 and Matthew 2:13-23**  
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**M. Michelle Fincher**  
**Calvary Presbyterian Church**

You've seen it on bumper stickers, coffee mugs, refrigerator magnets and anything else a slogan can be plastered to: "Keep Christ in Christmas!"

It's been a popular slogan for a number of years now, but it received extra attention during this fall's election cycle, when no less than the president-elect became a champion of the greeting "Merry Christmas," rather than the more generic "Season's Greetings" or "Happy Holidays."

It's not that anyone was advocating eliminating Santa, Rudolph, Frosty the Snowman or any of the other secular Christmas characters. The point was simply to never forget the true reason for the season: the birth of Jesus Christ.

Who could argue with that?

But, do any of us really think there was a danger of losing Jesus amidst the wrapping paper and the wreaths? *Really?* Sure, a huge, commercial holiday has just rolled over us. The retail juggernaut we witness every year has little to do with the babe in the manger. But isn't his place there pretty secure, even so?

All over the country, churches have recently put on Christmas pageants that tell the story of the nativity. The cast of characters may vary, but always there are three individuals at the heart of the story: Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus. Angels and shepherds come and go, in various numbers. Wise men may show up bearing gifts -- or, they may hold off until Epiphany. There may be an assortment of barnyard animals, either real or portrayed by kids in costume. There may even be an innkeeper to say "Sorry, no vacancy!" and slam the door.

Yet, there's one figure from the biblical narrative you'll rarely see portrayed in any church's Christmas pageant: King Herod. He's just too mean and nasty for that holy night.

We know the first part of the story well. Matthew tells how the wise men came to the court of King Herod, asking where they could find the child born King of the Jews. Herod, of course, was the real, live king of the Jews, and he was not

interested in letting anyone undercut his power. But he was too crafty a politician to show his hand too soon. There was intelligence to be gathered -- and if these naïve foreigners could be enlisted as spies to lead him to this new King who wanted his job, so much the better.

Fortunately, the visitors from the east aren't slackers in the intelligence department. They can see right through Herod's smarmy hospitality, and so they return to their own country "by another way." That's where the reading from Matthew's story typically ends.

It's only Part 1, though, of a two-part story. Nobody likes to read the second half, and it's certainly *never* included in our nativity pageants because the details are so horrific. Wise men dropping off baby presents is one thing. What comes next is rated "R" for intense violence which is not the sort of thing we want little kids to hear before heading back home to leave milk and cookies out for Santa. Visions of sugarplums could be replaced by bloody nightmares.

Herod is enraged to learn the magi have given him the slip. And so he sends his soldiers out to commit an atrocity worthy of any of history's notorious despots. His men are to break into every Jewish home in the region around Bethlehem, pull every male baby from the arms of their mothers and cut their little throats.

Believe it or not, there's a Christmas carol about this woeful business. It's called the Coventry Carol, and ironically, it has one of the most achingly beautiful melodies of all Christmas music. The words are a melancholy lullaby, sung by grieving mothers to their dead children. You're likely familiar with the carol and maybe with the first verse:

*Lullay, Thou little tiny Child,  
By, by, lully, lullay,  
Lullay, Thou little tiny Child,  
By, by, lully, lullay.*

*Herod the king, in his raging,  
Charged he hath this day,  
His men of might, in his own sight,  
All young children to slay*

*Then woe is me, poor child for thee  
And ever mourn and say*

*For thy parting, nor say nor sing  
By, by, lully, lullay.*

What part does this dark episode have to play in the bright and joyous tale of Christmas? It's a discordant note, struck in the closing bars of a beautiful melody. Until now, everything has been sweetness and light. But then, the fists of Herod's soldiers are pounding on Bethlehem's doors. The mothers of the City of David weep their bitter tears, and cradle their lifeless babes in their arms:

*Lullay, Thou little tiny child,  
By, by, lully, lullay.*

Just in case you're wondering, Herod -- at this point a bitter old man and likely in the final year of his 41-year reign -- was fully capable of ordering such atrocities. You see, Herod was king in name only, and everyone knew that. It was the Romans who really called the shots. Herod's job was to do the imperial dirty work, subduing a rebellious colony on behalf of the emperor. It was a task he performed with relish.

During the course of his reign, Herod had at least nine wives and 14 children. There were probably more, but daughters' births were not always recorded, so we can't know for sure. He put one of his wives, Mariamne I, on trial for adultery. The chief witness for the prosecution was Mariamne's own mother -- who, it was said, testified against her daughter only because she feared for her own life. Herod executed his wife, which led her mother to declare herself queen, charging that Herod was mentally unfit to rule. Not a wise decision on her part. Herod put her to death without a trial. Talk about a dysfunctional family!

There's more. There were two young sons remaining from Herod's marriage to Mariamne. As they grew older, the king considered them threats to his power. He tried to put them on trial for treason, but Emperor Augustus put a stop to that by ordering the sons and the father to reconcile. A few years later, however, Herod outmaneuvered the emperor. He sent a huge financial donation to revive the Olympic Games, something Augustus very much wanted. In exchange, the emperor allowed Herod to execute his two sons. Later, though, he was heard to mutter, "I would rather be Herod's dog than Herod's son."

But that's still not all. After murdering his wife and his two sons, Herod named his eldest son, Antipater -- a child of a different mother -- the exclusive heir to the throne. But Herod never could tolerate a rival. He grew jealous of his latest

crown prince, put him on trial for treason like the others and had him executed. The emperor was so appalled that he refused to allow any of Herod's remaining sons to claim the title of king -- although three of them would eventually rule as "tetrarchs," each governing one-third of his father's realm.

Thirty-three years later, one of these tetrarchs, Herod Antipas, would look upon Jesus as he stood before him in chains, wearing a crown of thorns. Given Herod's history with any he saw as potential rivals, clearly it's not too much to say that this man was capable of dispatching soldiers to kill babies.

Jesus, of course, escaped that fate. An angel of the Lord came to Joseph in a dream, warning him to take his family and flee to Egypt. Some scholars believed it is likely that they settled in the thriving Jewish quarter of Alexandria, a great center of learning. It's possible Jesus spent his early years there, learning from the city's distinguished rabbis.

Some find it troubling that God sent an angel to rescue Jesus, but let other babies die. It's yet another facet of the thorny theological problem we face so often in this world: the problem of evil and the question of why a just and all-powerful God allows human suffering to take place. There's no easy answer to that theological and philosophical question, but King Herod does seem well-suited to play the role of evil incarnate.

So, what's the takeaway? Should we reserve a role for Herod in next year's Christmas pageant or not?

*Relax.* It's a rhetorical question! Herod doesn't belong in our Christmas plays, but that doesn't mean we should forget about him entirely.

Herod is important to the Christmas story because *he reminds us what kind of world we live in and why this world still needs a savior.* Even if we all had a fine Christmas, there are plenty of neighbors on this planet whose lives are tainted with suffering -- people for whom the least of their worries is whether or not they managed to get into the Christmas spirit.

What about those hordes of desperate Syrian refugees who have swelled the population of Europe -- and the small trickle who have been so fortunate as to be resettled in the United States or Canada? Some of these refugees are Christians, members of some of the oldest churches in the world. They're wondering if they will ever return to the land of their ancestors -- and whether those ancient churches

will ever again resound with Christian hymns. What kind of Christmas did they have this year?

Then there are those who are afflicted by poverty a lot closer to home. Yes, many of our neighbors "had themselves a merry little Christmas," but a great many more find themselves far removed from the vision of perfection and peace portrayed on so many sparkly Christmas cards.

Jesus didn't come into the world to bring us a mid-winter festival of peace and contentment. He wasn't born into a placid Christmas-card scene, but rather into the sort of world where families wander homeless and corrupt tyrants rule by murder and deceit.

Jesus didn't come to offer respite from the world. He came to save it, and he gave us, his followers, a role in carrying out that salvation project, using the spiritual and material gifts he's given us.

If we strive to keep Herod in Christmas, maybe it will be just a little easier to remember Jesus' real purpose—and our part of his mission. Amen.