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In the Reign of Herod

Matthew 2: 13-23

Well it's been almost a week since the big day, since the big birthday and we can probably all agree that we've had enough cake (and cookies and breads and eggnog)! Looking back on Christmas we often wonder how we didn't experience diabetic shock from all the sweets we've ingested. Now, almost a week later, most of us are probably coming down off that sugar overdose.

It seems the Christmas story is in danger of this same experience. We've heard the story of stables and shepherds, angels and swaddling clothes, for most of our lives and we have a tendency to remember the scene with a bit of mist around its edges. It's all cozy and warm. Mary is meek and mild. The baby, no crying he makes. Christmas cards sketch its sweetness; carols sing of its charm. For many of us these images give us renewed awe and wonder at God's work in the world and, for this, we should be grateful. After awhile, though, most of us wonder if Jesus' world has anything to do with where we live. I don't know about you but I do not live in a world with a soft mist around its edges or where babies don't cry. Just when Christmas becomes too sugar-coated for us the Scriptures give us a new taste, a more bitter flavor. And no one can put a terrible taste in our mouths faster than King Herod.

While he is called "king" he is little more than a puppet for Rome but, for now, "king" he is over the region and Herod's reign is marked by violence and the vastness of his own fears. Living under Herod's reign means living in a world where despots spread terror on a whim. Living under Herod's reign means that not everyone is fed. Living under Herod's reign means a world where leaders are assassinated and children are murdered simply because they are in the way. This is reality we are used to; reality under Herod's reign. It is this world, our world, into which Jesus is born. His story is not simply a watercolor image on a holiday card. It is surrounded by the reality you and I know so well. Before he is even two years old he knows what it is to be a fugitive, his family fleeing in fear to a country they do not know, whose language they do not speak, returning they know not when. All of this is because of Herod's reign.

Yet this is what we speak about when we sing, "O come, O come, Emmanuel." We are asking God to join us and our desires are fulfilled by Jesus, not just with the stable and his birth but, especially, with his family on the run. God chose to come to us; to be with us; and in doing this, God, the King of earth and heaven, joined us under Herod's reign. In Jesus, God truly knows us. God can truly love us. God can truly save us, because, in Christ he is us. As our Hebrews text reminds us, Jesus can call us brothers and sisters because he shares our flesh and blood. He knows the precariousness of life and the many sad and bitter tastes it can leave within us. Yet, even under such a reign, Jesus does not simply bow to Herod's kingdom. In taking on the tragedies of this world he destroys them.

Do not be fooled, Matthew's Christmas narrative is more a clash of kingdoms than it is a birthday celebration. There is no stable in his scene (that is Luke) and no shepherds either (also Luke's version). For Matthew there are kingdoms coming together and one is of this earth and the other is God's. He begins his gospel laying out Jesus' royal pedigree, connecting his lineage all the way back

to King David. Poor shepherds do not pay the child a visit but nobles from other lands. They come looking for a new king who will rule over all and they've brought gifts of state for him as well. We read that King Herod, and all of Jerusalem, tremble to hear of his kingship, even though he is just a small boy. The stage is set for an epic contest between these two powers.

Though there will be epic moments to come—walking on water, raising people from the dead, healing the sick—in this case the epic contest is won rather quietly. Matthew simply tells us: “When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared...” Do you hear the good news in these words? “When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared...” The Herods of this world will die. Their kingdoms will not last and their reigns will not strike fear forever. Herods will pass away and the Lord will still be speaking. One reign will fade while God's reign will never end. Between the two there is no contest for even if one Herod or another holds sway right now we know that it is Jesus who rules over all and he rules with justice and righteousness. His reign brings us peace.

As we look to a new year we know that the Herods will continue to reign, that our lives will not become images of perfection. But may we also be keenly aware that there is a new king in the world. If we focus on him then our lives will also reflect his reign of grace and peace. It is quite like the baptisms we will soon experience together. When we are baptized we are doused in water that symbolizes the waters of chaos at creation, the floodwaters in Noah's time, the crashing waves that come into the disciples' boat. We are covered in that water and we do not set it aside or ignore its reality but we rise through it to begin a new life, a life in which those waters also cleanse us and feed our thirst. Just so, we cannot deny the often horrifying realities around us but, living under Jesus' reign, we can rise through them to experience the new life he brings.

Whatever the world has handed you—whatever or whoever has been reigning, no matter how bitter,—let us, this year, also be a people who stand up and proclaim the sweetness, true sweetness, of Jesus', not Herod's, reign in our life. Amen.