

Some Sympathy for King Herod

Matthew 2:1-5, 7-14, 16-21

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This time of year, tributes to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., echo in churches and synagogues and lecture halls all over America. Surely Dr. King deserves at least as much attention as we give him and probably a good deal more. Dr. Martin Luther King was a genius, but his real genius is that he came from a tradition that speaks to the whole world. I have a question for you, inspired by the music we have heard here this morning. It is a historical question and a cultural question, but at bottom it is also a spiritual question. How do you explain the enduring power of African American culture? People wonder why *I* am caught up with black culture and black history. Instead, let me ask you something: Why is the whole world obsessed with African American history and culture?

From the spirituals and gospel to the blues and R&B and rock and roll and hip hop, from Malcolm and Martin to Toni Morrison and Richard Wright and James Baldwin and Alice Walker and W.E.B. Du Bois and John Hope Franklin and Maya Angelou and Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes, from hip hop to slam dunk, in slang and style and language and art and politics, the whole world echoes black America, and this has been true for a long time. The truth is that voice of the black South almost dominates world culture. Black folks are 12 percent of the population of one country, and yet their culture resonates all over the planet. Doesn't that strike you as odd? It is so much a part of our world that we can't even see it. But I think if you were a scholar from another planet, and you dropped by Earth to check it out, you might find yourself asking, "Who are these people? Are they magic? What on earth is going on, on Earth?"

I have a theory, literally a global explanation. If you walk down to Richard B. Thornton Library this afternoon and spin the globe and put your finger down at random, chances are your finger is going to land on a country where ruthless, reckless tyrants and bloodthirsty empires oppress the many people, extracting the wealth of that place and steering it all into the pockets of the privileged few. Tell me when this starts to sound familiar. They draft other people's children into armies and send the armies to bring the riches of the earth back to the privileged few. Tell me when this starts to sound familiar. Put your finger down anywhere on the globe, and you will not find a democracy, but instead you will find sultans and emirs and potentates and presidents who lie to the people, and if you don't like it, they'll send their secret police to take you away. This has been the human condition for most people most of the time: oppression and exploitation. The world is a prison house.

And that is why the world is obsessed with the voice of the black South, born in the bottom of a slave ship, because African American culture began in revolt against what Dr. Martin Luther King called the "thingification" of human beings. African American culture was born in opposition to the idea that a person can ever be a thing, and it has given rise to a tradition that addresses the whole world in a voice of audacious truth and defiant hope.

People recognize that truth, and they need that hope, and that is why everywhere

on this earth, you can hear the songs and inflections and insights of the African American freedom struggle, because it speaks to the largest and most profound questions of what it means to be a human being and to be in relationship to God.

And that brings us to the faith. The sons and daughters of Africa cried out to God in the bottom of that boat, but they were not Christians at the time. Ironically, they learned about Christianity here from the white men who claimed to own them. Why did the plantation owners want to convert the enslaved to Christianity? Simple—because they wanted to conquer their minds as well as their bodies. They knew what the corporate media today knows: that if you control people's brains, you don't have to work so hard to control their bodies. And so the masters taught the enslaved sons and daughters of Africa about gentle Jesus, meek and mild, who never made trouble for the kingdoms of this world. The masters promised them that their reward would be in heaven. But talk about a failure! The white masters telling the enslaved Africans about the faith was probably the most unsuccessful political project in the history of the world!

Do you think that the enslaved black folks learned about Moses and the exodus of the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt from white people? Don't you think maybe the white preachers neglected to mention Moses telling old Pharaoh to let my people go? And if they were so intent on saving the souls of black folk, why do you think the masters passed laws against teaching slaves to read? Why did they pass laws against black teaching and black preaching?

When African Americans began to read the book for themselves, that created a problem, you see. The masters didn't want them reading about Pharaoh's army sinking beneath the Red Sea. They knew they were Pharaoh, and they couldn't afford that mess. They didn't want any part of a story about a little shepherd boy bringing down Goliath with a handful of stones from the creek. Unfortunately for the masters, the slaves began to read that book for themselves, and they developed their own theology, rooted in God's vision of equality and liberation.

And this is the vision that the nameless and numberless authors of the spirituals turned into a theology in song, a tradition that taught God's truth to an unlettered people, demanding to know: "Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel? And why not every man?" This is the vision that insists "You've Got to Move," reminds us "How I Got Over." This is the vision that reminds us that "The Blood Done Sign My Name."

As I read this second chapter of Matthew, I am chasing three questions. Who is King Herod? Who are these wise men? And who are the Holy Family? And the truth is that we are. We are King Herod, bent on our own power, and we are the wise men, following that star, and we are Mary and Joseph, entrusted with a sacred responsibility. Listen to how our historian, Matthew, defines the story in the first seven words: "In the days of Herod the King." He doesn't call the period "the Age of the Wise Men" or "the Shepherd Era." He names it "the days of Herod the King." To understand the religion of Jesus, we have to understand the world in which God chose to emerge—"in the days of Herod the King."

Who was Herod? In a time when the Roman Empire had conquered them and occupied their land, the Jews were an oppressed people. Jesus was born into a despised minority group in the clutches of a mighty empire. In a time of Roman domination, they burned with anger and humiliation and longed to be free. God chose to walk among us as a member of the disinherited—those who had been 'buked and been

scorned. God could have come as a Roman general, but instead he chose to be born among the oppressed.

King Herod was a Jew, not a Roman. He was a son of the oppressed, but he worked for the oppressor, a driver on the Roman plantation who had been put into power by the Roman army in a blood conquest over his own people. What were the Romans doing in the Middle East? The Romans were there because they coveted the trade routes that passed through Judea, trade routes that siphoned much of the world's wealth. Herod was their Jewish overseer.

And yet Herod had popular support, as the response to the rumor of Jesus' birth reveals to us. Matthew writes: "When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him." All Jerusalem was with him, and yet he still lived in fear. Herod had armies, administrators, and a considerable intelligence operation. He had the imperial power of Rome behind him. And yet he trembled at the birth of a baby boy in Bethlehem.

So Herod assembled "all the chief priests and scribes" to ask what they knew about this Messiah thing. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea," and cited their scholarly authorities: "For so it is written by the prophets." But did any of them do anything about it? It was only five miles down the road. But apparently these academic types didn't feel called upon to investigate the facts or to act upon them in any way.

But the wise men were different from the other scholars: they left their ivory tower and followed that star. Herod asked them to report to him: "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him bring me word, that I too may come and worship him." But Herod was not about to let a Messiah rise up among the Jews to threaten his authority. He would kill that baby boy if he could find him. But the wise men, warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, gave him the slip, and after they had worshiped the baby Jesus, they returned to their own country by another way.

Matthew says that King Herod then flew into a rage, and "he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in that region who were two years old or under, according to the time which he had ascertained from the wise men."

We like to think of King Herod as a bloodthirsty madman, killing all those babies. We like to think that he's not like us, that instead he is a moral monster, Herod the baby-killer. But I have a much more sympathetic interpretation, and you do, too, most likely. We are a lot more like Herod than we like to think, and Herod is a lot more like us. We have to take Herod seriously as a moral actor because most of us are much closer to Herod than we are to Jesus. We all like to praise Dr. Martin Luther King, too, but Dr. King said that "unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final say in reality." You tell me what would have happened to Senator Obama in 2008 if he had gone on "Face the Nation" and announced that "unarmed truth and unconditional love [would] have the final say" in his administration? Surely he would still be Senator Obama, not President Obama. Who is more likely to get elected president of the United States—King Herod or King Jesus?

Let me just act as King Herod's attorney for a moment here. Don't be too hard on Herod right away—you have to understand that Herod was a moderate, not a madman. If he had been just bloodthirsty, Herod he could have had his soldiers destroy Bethlehem and everyone in it. But Herod did not engage in senseless slaughter.

Herod only kills Jewish boys born in Bethlehem between the two dates, dates which he had determined by consultation with leading scholars. As Herod's attorney,

I will concede that Herod was willing to kill innocent people—only one of those Jewish baby boys could have been the rumored Messiah. The rest of the casualties would have been innocent. But he did not kill girls, women, or older males, and he did not kill boys from places outside the area around Bethlehem. He only killed people who represented a threat to his power.

And before you write off Herod, think of the good he could do with that power. Herod had a public program that he believed in. He built much of the world that people there knew. And we have already noted that he enjoyed public support. Surely, at least in his own mind, he had used his power to serve the public good. His violence was carefully calibrated to preserve Roman influence in the world. And what order would that world have known without the Romans? Wouldn't it have descended into civil chaos? Didn't the economy of the region depend upon Roman initiative and ingenuity? If all roads led to Rome, well, they must have built all the roads. And if Herod had been unwilling to protect his authority, if he had lacked credibility, the Romans might have replaced him with someone even more ruthless. No, Herod was simply a realist, dealing with the world as he found it. Too often, we side with the powers of this world—but we don't have to.

And here is where I have to resign as King Herod's attorney. Oh, he's got the money to pay me, now. The Herods of this world always have all the guns and all the money and all the shoeshine lawyers in the whole wide world. But with all those armies and all that gold, King Herod doesn't have the one thing that could save him. Herod has power, but he has no love.

And the other thing you may have noticed: the wise men are warned in a dream not to go back to Herod; an angel comes to the Holy Family in a dream, and urges them to flee down into Egypt. Herod is the only character in this story who has no love and has no dream. All he thinks about is power.

Power without love is bankrupt, serving only itself. That's one thing King Herod shows us. But Martin Luther King explained for the ages that power without love is bankrupt, but that love without power is vacant and sentimental. Don't tell God that you love His people, and then look away as they huddle beneath the bombs. Don't tell God that you love His children, and then refuse to support the public schools and deny people jobs and decent housing. God's love often calls upon us to act in the world.

We find the wise men much easier to like than King Herod, and that's why they're in the Christmas pageant. They're romantic figures, too. They followed a distant star. We like that sort of thing. We don't really want our children doing it, but we like it anyway. And they were generous. Okay, they were late, but I don't care. My sister insists that the most improbable thing in the entire Bible is Matthew's claim that there were *three* wise men. But the text does not even say that there were three of them, but merely names three gifts. Nor does the text say who actually purchased the gifts. I gave several gifts this past Christmas that were as much a surprise to me as to the person who opened them. But the important thing is these scholars had the faith to follow their best lights and the wisdom to recognize the good news of the coming of Jesus Christ.

The wise men were scholars; they studied the heavens and the ancient texts. But they didn't leave it in the library and the classroom. They recognized the star because they had done their homework, but they followed it to Bethlehem because of their courage.

It's not easy to be a wise man. You know everybody thought they were crazy at

the time. Go home and tell your husband or your wife that you've seen a star in the east, and you've got to go, and you don't know when you'll be back, but you're taking a lot of money with you.

And when they got back, do you think that everybody in town said, "Well, I thought you were crazy, but turns out you were visionary!" Not likely. Everybody just thought, "Here they come, dragging back in here. All they did was lose a lot of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Where's the Messiah, old stargazer?" And then they had to settle back in at their old jobs, in the old world, having seen the Messiah, but without a star to guide them. They had to carry that star in their hearts for the rest of their lives, and they died before the world knew they had been right. It isn't easy being a wise man, and everybody thinks you're a fool, and you probably wonder about it yourself.

But they weren't fools. One of the most important things you need to understand about the wise men is that they made a fool of old King Herod. He told them to come back and tell him about that baby boy. They said, "Yessuh, Cap'n, we'll go find out about that Messiah, and we'll be right back to let you know where He is. Riiight."

Back in the days of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the black women who cleaned white people's houses were the backbone of that movement. One of them was scrubbing a white woman's floor one day, and the white woman confronted her. She said, "Louise, what do you know about this bus boycott?" The black woman said, "No, ma'am, I don't have anything do with that mess." The white woman said, "Now, Louise, I don't want you involved with that boycott." And the black woman shook her head and said, "No, ma'am, I don't want anything to do with any boycott. I'm just staying away from the buses until the whole thing is over."

And the wise men hustled old Herod just like that. God spoke to the wise men in a dream and warned them to back away from Herod, and to say not a word about that baby. They knew better than to tell King Herod the truth! They gave him the slip, and they went back to their own country by another way.

And then there was Joseph and Mary. Think of their dilemma. First they were unmarried and pregnant and had to travel a long way to pay taxes and have a baby in a stable. Of course, there were all those heavenly hosts, and it was magical, but then these holiday visitors who would not go away. And suddenly they found themselves hunted by a murderous monarch who wanted to kill the baby. This warning came to them in a dream. They could have lied to themselves and said, no, no, the king would not harm an innocent child. But they believed in their dreams, and they protected that baby. God had given them something precious to protect, and they risked everything to keep that baby safe from harm.

Joseph and Mary were forced to become illegal aliens, undocumented, slipping across the border without a passport. The children of God, the parents of the Christ child, sneaked past King Herod's border patrol and entered Egypt without permission. Maybe they had to wade across the river with a precious bundle. If they ran out of money, maybe Joseph did some carpentry for cash under the table, an undocumented worker. Maybe they didn't speak the language, maybe their Arabic was not so good, and surely some of the Egyptians resented them for coming. And yet they had a baby to take care of and government agents on their trail.

And where did they flee to escape from King Herod?—Down into Egypt. Remember, these were the children of Israel. Egypt had been the land of their enslavement. It would have been like black people in Chicago fleeing to Mississippi. This had been

the land of their bondage.

The South is not so heavily African American because the weather is so nice. Black folks did not come here looking for work. Somebody rode in the bottom of a boat, somebody walked here from Charleston wearing shackles, somebody primed tobacco from dawn until dark, praying that her children would one day be free. She didn't know how she would get over. Somebody got dragged down a back street to a place called Lynch Hill and died at the hands of King Herod. This is the dark and bloody ground of our history, and yet, as it says in the book of Genesis, God will make us fruitful in the very land of our affliction. Sometimes He will set us free in the very heart of our bondage.

That's why the spirituals and gospel and the blues and jazz echo all over the world. And that is why we have to remember Dr. King, not as the black Santa Claus, who just wanted everybody to be nice. We need to remember Martin Luther King, the black revolutionary, who gave his life so that the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution, those revolutionary documents, would no longer be worthless scraps of paper. Dr. King said, "You don't have to go to Karl Marx to be a revolutionary." He said: "I got it from a man named Jesus."

And in closing, I want to invite you to a church. It isn't my church, by any means. It doesn't meet under any steeple, and it has no denomination. It meets in our hearts and in our history. Our church is born in the bottom of a boat, and it meets in the woods and in the fields and in the empty tobacco barns. It is a church that knows that Pharaoh's army will never make it across the water. It is a church that knows that a shepherd boy with a slingshot will always bring down mighty Goliath. Our church knows that when God sends you a baby, you've got to move. Our church remembers how we got over. And our church knows we are headed home, home to our own country, because the blood done sign our names.