

Characters of Christmas: Herod

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- [0 : 0 0] This morning, we are continuing in our series on the characters of Christmas. As we look at the circumstances of the birth of Jesus from the perspective of some of the key people who are directly involved.
- Every engaging story seems to have a villain, doesn't it? A bad guy. Whether you're talking about fiction or non-fiction, the stories that seem to resonate with us most, seem to draw us in the most, are those that involve conflict.
- To use literary terms, we're really talking about the idea of good guys and bad guys. The protagonist and the antagonist.
- Gotta put that English degree to work at times. Simply put, the protagonist, notice the pro there at the beginning, is the good guy. And the antagonist, antagonist, is the bad guy.
- The Oxford Dictionary defines an antagonist as a person who actively opposes or is hostile to someone or something. An adversary.
- [1 : 1 2] And at this year, when we think about, this time of year, when we think about villains, there's lots that pop into mind. We may think of Ebenezer Scrooge from Charles Dickens' classic novel, A Christmas Carol, which I enjoy.
- Or The Grinch from the animated classic, How the Grinch Stole Christmas. Or, perhaps you're a fan of a different kind of film, Mr. Potter.
- The grouchy, hard-hearted banker in Frank Capra's classic film, It's a Wonderful Life. And while there are some well-known fictional villains, there are also many historical villains as well.
- Men and women who have sought power or influence or wealth, who have pursued their own agendas at a great cost to other people.
- And in some cases, we'd recognize entire ethnic groups of people. There are many famous bad guys and girls, it's not gender exclusive, in the Bible.
- [2 : 1 9] And I'm going to briefly highlight a few. Obviously, the greatest villain identified in Scripture is Satan. Once the highest of all the angels, he sought for himself the honor and glory only due to God.
- While he has ultimately been defeated, he continues to do everything he can to cause havoc for God's people. Delilah.
- In the book of Judges, we learn that she tricked Samson into revealing the source of his strength. She betrayed him and delivered him to his enemies, the Philistines, and made a few bucks for herself in the process.
- In the book of Esther, we read about a man named Haman, who wanted to wipe out the entire nation of Israel, simply because a Jewish man refused to bow down to him.
- A woman named Herodias was the one who was responsible for the death of John the Baptist, as we learn in the book of Matthew. Cain.

[3 : 31] The Bible's first murderer. A man who wasn't happy when God favored his brother Abel's sacrifice over his own. And even after God rebuked his bad behavior, Cain let his jealousy completely take over.

He killed his brother and then even lied to God that he had done it. Jezebel. Jezebel. Jezebel was a heathen princess who married Ahab, the king of northern Israel, as we read in 1 Kings 18-21.

She was heavily involved in idolatry and wicked schemes. While the Bible doesn't identify him by name, the Pharaoh of Egypt during Moses' time, scholars suggest, I found this interesting, it would have likely been Ramses II.

Pharaoh of Egypt during Moses' time is one of the most infamous villains in the Bible. Despite seeing miraculous sign after miraculous sign as proof of God's power, and being given demands from Moses that he release the Israelite people from slavery, Pharaoh remained stubborn and refused to relent.

And ultimately, he paid a terrible price for his defiance. There are many examples throughout Scripture of men and women who, as the Bible says, did evil in the eyes of the Lord.

[5 : 09] People who pursued their own ends and ambitions, who hurt others in their selfish desire to get their own way, to meet their own short-sighted needs.

And some of them even made the wrong decisions in the face of God, being at work right before them in a very powerful way, right before their eyes.

Pharaoh's an example. This morning, our villain, our characters of Christmas bad guy, is Herod. When we consider Herod's evil actions in the Christmas story, I believe it's helpful for us to have some context for them.

We need to better understand the whole story and gain a broader perspective. I want to recognize that some of you may also be listening this morning and thinking, has Pastor Kent lost his mind?

Isn't this a Christmas series? Where are the shepherds? Where are the angels? Shouldn't we be focusing on just the good stuff? Well, fair point.

[6 : 19] But this morning I want us to remember that God is at work at all times. In all situations. In all circumstances. One of my favorite passages in all of Scripture, Romans 8.28, tells us, And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him.

Who've been called according to his purpose. It doesn't say in most things. In some things. When things are going well.

When we're doing the right things. Do you add those filters yourself? The circumstances of Jesus' birth form a rich and amazing story filled with joy and wonder and the miracles of God coming near.

But Herod brings a contrast and dramatic tension that really sticks out for us in this story, doesn't it? And that's why I want us to consider the role he played in the greater story.

And what we can learn from his actions. We're first introduced to Herod in the Bible in Matthew 2. When Scripture identifies to us that Jesus was born during the time of King Herod.

[7 : 55] So he is the dominant background figure right from the beginning of the story. Now this is obviously an actor playing the role of Herod. But it gives us some idea of how he might have looked.

There aren't a lot of photos. So during the time of King Herod. That phrase. That's an important phrase for us to remember this morning. Because Jesus was born during the time of King Herod.

The phrase sets the context for us. It tells us who was in power. It tells us whose influence and agenda was at work.

And I believe this helps us set the context within which Jesus was born. And Herod's story will also continue into our sermon next week.

As we look at the wise men. So I'm not going to give away too much. But this is part one-ish. So believe it or not. As we consider Herod. I'm going to begin by recounting some of his greatest achievements.

[9 : 00] And his legacy. Because I think we'd all acknowledge that people are what? Complicated. And even the most selfish, power-hungry, controlling, and manipulative person.

Is still a child of God. Like you and me. And I'm a bit of a history buff. So I wanted to dig a bit. Herod, also known as Herod the Great, was born in 73 BC.

And if you're a lot of historians, we'll use BCE. Which is before common era. So BC and BCE are the same. But you may hear one or the other.

And he died in March or April, they believe, for BC. And remember that it goes from higher numbers to lower numbers as we get to the middle. And then increases from there.

But he was born in March or April, 4 BCE, in Jericho. From 37 to 4 BCE, Herod was the Roman-appointed king of Judea.

[10 : 10] Under the reign of Emperor Caesar Augustus. And in fact, when Herod was appointed to this position in Judea, hear this.

He was given the title, King of the Jews. And during his reign, Herod was the driving force behind the construction of many fortresses, aqueducts, theaters, and other public buildings.

And he's recognized for having generally raised the prosperity of his land. Historians note that two of his greatest legacies were the construction of the port of Caesarea Palestine, on the coast between Joppa and Haifa.

And that would eventually become the capital of Roman Palestine. And a place called Sebaste, which means, in Greek, Augustus.

See the tribute there and the wise political move to build something and name it after your boss? Sebaste was a royal city constructed on the long, desolate site of ancient Samaria.

[11 : 27] I'm going to show you... I get to use the laser pointer, which is fun. I think. Do I? No, I don't.

Never mind. I don't know. Herod built a site called the Herodium. So this is the Herodium that you see here. It's in the middle of the Judean desert. It's a place that included a great palace, a fortress, and a small town.

And folks, imagine the desert being flat. Does that look flat to you? This was man-made. Crazy.

And it is believed that Herod is actually, or was actually, buried at that site. He also built the fortress of Antonia and a magnificent palace in Jerusalem.

Parts of which, both, can still be seen today. Jerusalem. Probably Herod's greatest achievement and the most positive thing about his legacy during his reign was that he completely refurbished the temple in Jerusalem.

[12 : 41] And he converted it into what is most familiar to us today. He also expanded and improved many foreign towns and great cities such as Beirut, Damascus, Antioch, and Rhodes.

I told a pastor friend of mine this next piece and he said, What? I had no idea. Herod, believe it or not, supported the Olympic Games and eventually became their president.

Did you know this much about Herod? Did you want to know this much about Herod? Herod walked a fine line. He gained the favor and support of the Roman Empire.

His rise to power was thanks in large part to his father's positive standing with Julius Caesar when he was emperor. But Herod also, I don't know if you knew this, had Jewish ties as well.

And he saw value in that culture. While Herod's father was an Edomite by descent, his ancestors had converted to Judaism.

[13 : 58] Herod would likely have been raised as a Jew. Is that news to you? It was news to me. I don't know about you, but for me that was an amazing revelation and it put a lot of things into context.

But also, do you see the puzzle there? If Herod had been raised a Jew, would he not have been seeking a Messiah just like other Jews were?

And if he were raised as a Jew, and we can assume he would have had an understanding and appreciation for the law and for God, how can we begin to understand his role as the villain of the Christmas story?

Historian Seth Schwartz rightly suggests that Herod's reign polarizes opinion amongst scholars and historians. Because some view his legacy as evidence of success.

And some as a reminder of his tyrannical rule. It was during his later years that Herod became the center of political and family intrigues.

[15 : 14] And the New Testament actually portrays him as a tyrant who ruled over the kingdom. Harshly ruled over the kingdom into which Jesus was born.

Historians suggest that Herod had a dark and cruel streak that showed up more and more as he got older. And he's often seen by historians as a mix of a clever and efficient ruler and a cruel, deeply cruel tyrant.

He seemed to have been very insecure and power-hungry as a man. And he also, it seems to suggest in history, that he developed some sort of mental illness that compounded his issues.

Herod was deeply in love with his wife, Mary Amni. But despite his love for her, he was prone to extreme bouts of jealousy. And that was something that his sister Salome fed into constantly.

Trying to break up their marriage. You can read this with me. Not out loud, but author Mark Strauss says of Herod, He was distrustful, jealous, and brutal.

[16 : 34] Ruthlessly crushing any potential opposition. Jews never accepted him as their legitimate king. And this infuriated him.

He constantly feared conspiracy. He executed his wife when he suspected she was plotting against him. Three of his sons, another wife, and his mother-in-law met the same fate when they too were suspected of conspiracy.

Wow. For a man who seemed to follow Jewish ritual and wouldn't eat pork, there are records of that.

Herod seemed just fine with having his family members murdered. Historians say that Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus was said to have commented on Herod, that it's safer to be Herod's son than his son.

Quite a legacy. While seeming to be a worshiper of God on the one hand through his Jewish upbringing, Herod was also fiercely loyal to Rome.

[17 : 49] And so he would have likely participated in pagan rituals and rites as well. I believe Herod is often painted as a two-dimensional character in the Christmas story.

As a man whose sole purpose was to find the Messiah and kill him. That's generally what we remember him for, what we recognize in that story. And we see in Herod's later years a deeply disturbed and paranoid man who would stop at nothing to eliminate his competition, even if it meant slaughtering thousands of infants in his kingdom.

It's important to recognize that tyrants and bullies are cowards at heart. They rule by force.

And the one thing they fear most is a force greater than their own. Herod simply couldn't rationalize the coming of the Messiah.

Or even accept that. Because if the Messiah had come, then it meant that Herod, a man who claimed to follow God, would actually be ruling in opposition to him.

[19 : 12] Ultimately, this man who had been given the title King of the Jews would pass into history as a cruel ruler.

I even coined the term crueler, perhaps. The least favorite of the donuts. But a cruel ruler who failed to prevent the coming of the true King of the Jews.

He tried. But he failed. To prevent the coming of the King of the Jews. The King of all kings. So this morning, what can we learn from Herod, of all people?

Do you ever find yourself seeking to, as the saying goes, play both sides? As Herod did with the Jews and the Romans. Do you seek to balance what God is asking for you as his child with what you want for yourself or what you believe others expect of you?

Are you submitting to God in some areas of your life while resisting others? We see in Herod a man who sought to follow God but on his own terms.

[20 : 35] Are you protective of what you seem to perceive to be yours? Your time. Your money.

Your things. When you're defending your position in a situation, your perspective or your stuff, do you begin to see others as a threat in some way?

To your personal security or your happiness? And do you recognize times in your life when you become envious of someone else? As you seek to defend yourself, have you ever recognized yourself becoming defensive or even paranoid?

You might be thinking, but aren't defending yourself and being defensive the same thing? No, actually they're not.

You see, when you're defending yourself, there's a sense of something that you believe. Your views, your opinions may be being questioned by someone and perhaps unjustly.

[21 : 54] Defending yourself may mean standing up for what could be considered to be right in a situation. Pure motives, good motives.

But being defensive, more often than not, is actually quite negative. Being defensive implies that you may actually be, believe it or not, at fault in a situation or a conflict.

But rather than accepting responsibility, you choose to lash out, to hurt others, to deflect blame or responsibility.

And at its very core, I believe a tendency toward being defensive or paranoid is a cause for concern. Because I believe that that reveals that we are more me-focused than we are focusing on others, or more importantly, on God.

Herod continues to be a key figure in the Christmas story, as we'll see next week as we look at the wise men. And as we've reflected on Herod's life and legacy this morning as a character of Christmas, how do we receive the news of Jesus, the King of Kings?

[23 : 23] Do we view Him through a lens of what we think we may have to give up to lose in recognizing and following Him, as Herod did?

Or are we able to see Him through a lens of the miraculous richness and renewal that we have to gain?

Let's pray. Let's pray.