Matthew 2:1-3 HCSB  After Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of King Herod, wise men from the east arrived unexpectedly in Jerusalem, (2) saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him." (3) When King Herod heard this, he was deeply disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.

Introduction: The Man Who Tried To Kill Christmas

This is the Christmas season. The auditorium is decorated, most of us have Christmas trees, and our hearts are full -- and everyone’s happy, right? No, there’s one man who wasn’t happy about Christmas. In fact, he was pretty angry about the whole thing. We’re talking about a man who hated Christmas even more than the Grinch and Scrooge combined. In fact, he tried to kill Christmas. It’s a strange and bizarre story that doesn’t sound right amid the Christmas carols, bright lights and poinsettias.

And this fellow’s not a make-believe character. He’s for real. He hated Christmas . . . and he’d never even heard the word. He’s the man history calls Herod the Great and his story is told in Matthew 2.

PART ONE

Herod was the embodiment of the ultimate villain. He exhibited 4 classic characteristics:

1. Preoccupation with Power.

   Born into a politically well-connected family, Herod was destined for a life of hardball power brokering. At 25 years old, he was named the governor of Galilee, a high position for such a young man. The Romans were hoping that Herod could control the Jews who lived in that area. In 40 B.C. the Roman Senate named him "King of the Jews." It was a title the Jews hated because he was anything but religious. In fact he wasn’t even considered a Jew because Jews count their nationality through their mothers and his mother was Arab.

   Herod was addicted to power. Power has been described as the ultimate human obsession. If it were an alcoholic beverage, Herod was passed out on the floor drunk with it. His life, and his use of power, can be summed up in three words --

   a. Herod was extremely capable in what he was asked to do. Soon after becoming King, he wiped out several bands of guerrillas who were terrorizing the countryside and used subtle diplomacy to make peace accords with many competing factions -- he probably could have brought peace to Bosnia!

   b. In addition to being capable, Herod was also very crafty. He arranged all his relationships as conduits for power -- it was one thing he could never get enough of.

   c. Because he had a morbid distrust of anyone who might aspire to take his throne, he was also known as a cruel man. He held tightly to the reins of power and brutally removed anyone who got in his way. Over the years he killed many people: His brother-in-law, his mother-in-law, two of his sons, and even his wife

   You see, above everything else, Herod the Great was a cruel killer. That was his nature. He murdered out of spite and he killed to stay in power. Human life meant nothing to him. The great historian Josephus called him “barbaric,” another writer has dubbed him “the malevolent maniac.”

   The intensity of Herod’s cruelty grew in direct proportion to the amount of power he possessed. At least we can say that he lived a consistent life.
2. Preoccupation with Possessions.

Herod wanted it all. He wanted everything a Roman Caesar had. With the knack of a Donald Trump, Herod built 7 palaces and 7 theaters - one of which seated 9,500 people. He even built stadiums for sporting events - the largest could seat 300,000 fans! He even constructed a new temple for the Jews.

3. Preoccupation with Prestige.

Herod loved to make an impression on others. He built entire cities with state of the art architecture and amenities and then named them after his superiors. He was also a smooth talker and had a special ability to win over his opponents. His 10 marriages were prestige-oriented and politically motivated. He once married the daughter of his leading rival in order to gain prestige and power.

4. Preoccupation with Paranoia.

Poison - Ever since an enemy poisoned Herod’s father, who was a king himself, Herod was beset with paranoia. He went to great lengths to make sure a secret ingredient never ended up in his Big Mac.

Fortresses - When he became king, he commissioned tens of thousands of slaves to build over 10 emergency fortresses, all heavily armed and well provisioned.

Spies - In addition, he established an elaborate network of spies. Anyone with a plot to dethrone Herod was sniffed out and eliminated before he could eat breakfast. Those who opposed him would be invited to a midnight swim in the Jordan River with a cement bathrobe on.

He ruled for more than 40 years -- until he clashed with another King -- one who was also called, The King of the Jews.

PART TWO

All Shook Up – conviction is disturbing (Matt. 2:2-12)

Now, with that as background, let’s fast-forward to the final months of Herod’s life. Herod the Great, King of the Jews, was slowly dying of a disease. His body was racked with convulsions, his breath was foul, his skin covered with open sores, he was rapidly losing his mind. But he was still the King. And then, one day word came to him in Jerusalem that some visitors had arrived from the East.

These were strange men . . . with a strange question…a question that shook him to his core in Matthew 2:2:

“Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.”

They were looking for someone who was BORN King of the Jews. Herod was the King of the Jews - but he wasn’t born a King. He had to fight and kill to gain that title. What were these men talking about? Why didn’t his spies tell him about this threat to his throne?

Matthew 2:3 says that,

“When Herod heard this he was disturbed and all Jerusalem with him.”

The word “disturbed” means to shake violently. And no wonder. He had finally subdued his enemies. He had killed all his foes and was ready to die triumphantly. Now these strangers come with their strange question. He probably thought, “No time to rest now…one more person to kill…a young boy with pretensions to the throne.” No wonder the Bible says that all of Jerusalem was shaken -- no one knew what this wacko would do next.

Now, even though Herod is old, remember the three words that define him -- he was capable, crafty, and cruel. He knew that somewhere in the ancient oracles was a prediction of the exact place where the Messiah, or special one of God, was to be born. So
he called together all the ministers and religious leaders to find out if the Bible had anything to say about a coming King. Specifically, he wanted to know where He was supposed to be born. Without having to think much about it, they responded in Matthew 2:5-6:

“In Bethlehem in Judea, for this is what the prophet has written: ‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.’”

Herod winced when he heard the word, ruler. Suddenly things were getting serious. Maybe these strangers were on to something. What if the boy they were looking for was the One the Bible predicted would come? Herod had to take Him out - immediately.

So Herod called the stargazers secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said in verses 7-8,

“Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.”

Off they went. The star that led them over 800 miles through the desert led them another 5 miles to the exact house Jesus was in. When they found Jesus they bowed down and worshipped him, offering him expensive gifts. The mysterious men from the east knew something Herod would never know -- that the little boy in a tiny house would someday rule the world. They were not ashamed to give him gifts fit for a King.

Just before the wise men step off center stage and drift into the twilight of history, we are told one last fact about them in verse 12:

“Having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their own country by another route.”

The Butcher of Bethlehem – conviction sometimes lead to lashing out

Realizing that he has been tricked, Herod wigged out. Remember that he was a bloodthirsty killer by nature. All the worst instincts of a lifetime of cruelty now came to the surface.

Keep this in mind because it’s the only way you can understand what happened next. When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the wise men, he was furious and did something worthy of Hitler or Stalin or Saddaam Hussein. He ordered the cold-blooded murder of all males less than two years of age. Herod the Great had become the Butcher of Bethlehem.

Rarely in history was a battle between Kings so dismally stacked. Herod the capable, crafty, and cruel dictator filled with power, possessions, prestige, and paranoia, armed with firepower, resources and armies -- and little Jesus, held safely in the arms of his loving mother.

Sudden Impact – conviction inevitably leads to a decision

To say that the two Kings, Herod and Jesus, merely “crossed paths” is way too mild. According to a fundamental law of physics, the force of impact depends upon speed and direction. Jesus and Herod were both moving fast, but from totally opposite directions. King Herod represented the popular perspective on power: Get it, keep it, use it. King Jesus had a more simple, yet radical philosophy: Use power to serve others.

No wonder the two kings clashed. They both possessed immense power, but how they chose to use it revealed the hearts of two radically different men. One was a tyrant, the other a servant. One was consumed with self-interest, the other focused on pleasing God and serving others. One manipulated, slandered, deceived, and coerced; the other healed, touched, taught, and loved.
PART THREE
Herod in Us – periodic confession, repentance and restitution are necessary

Herod the Great was perhaps the ultimate oxymoron in history. Rich in what most of us consider valuable, he was totally bankrupt as a human being. He was addicted to power, obsessed with possessions, focused on prestige, and filled with paranoia.

In order to fully understand the opposite paths of Herod and Jesus, let’s take a look at the end of the story. Herod, with all his wealth and power, came to ruin. In the final year of his life, his body was infected with disease; his pain was so bad that he often screamed throughout the night.

Jesus, after a life of poverty and lowly position, descended yet further -- to a rough-hewn wooden cross. But He went to that cross mute -- like a lamb to the slaughter -- without resisting. By completely yielding His power, He also died. But there was a critical difference -- Herod could not save himself from death. Jesus could have, but He chose not to; and by doing so He conquered death not only for Himself but for all of us who believe in and follow Him.

In life, Jesus willingly suffered -- from the abuse by religious leaders, the ignorance, hard-heartedness, and rejection of many people, the constant threats to His life, the betrayals of friends, the beatings, and His death on our behalf -- all for a single purpose: to demonstrate God’s outrageous love. While Herod wielded the power of hate and self-protection, forming armies, building fortresses and killing at will, Jesus wielded the power of liberating love.

Friend, let’s be honest about something. If you and I take a hard look inside, we will see little Herods staring back at us. Given the right situation, every one of us is capable of working a little of Herod’s magic -- especially if it helps us get what we want.

I know there’s still some Herod kicking around inside of me. He comes out when I would rather rule, than serve; when I focus on what I own or what I want to buy rather than on what I can give; when I’d rather be honored, than look for ways to honor others; and when I see others as a threat instead of as people who matter to God.

Take Your Temperature – periodic self assessment is necessary

I’d like us to take a little assessment to see how we’re doing this morning. Let me ask you some questions. Which King is ruling your life right now? Are you infected with the virus of self-promotion and craftiness this Christmas? Do you think more about yourself than others? Do you crave power and the adrenaline rush that comes from controlling your own resources and controlling the people around you? Do you seek praise and adulation? Do you get upset when others don’t thank you or praise you for your work or do you do the things you do simply to serve? Are you more afraid of what others may do to you instead of how you can serve them? If so, then the influence of Herod may be sitting behind the control board of your life.

Choose a King – We must submit once for salvation then continue to submit

Herod the King and Jesus the King still clash today -- in fact, they compete with each other for control of our lives. I like how the old Bob Dylan song puts it: You gotta serve somebody.

Herod stated that he wanted to go and worship Jesus. It strikes me that Herod was in no way interested in bowing down to another King -- even though he said he was. Friend, are you a little like Herod in this regard? Do you say that you’re interested in Christianity, but you’re really not deep down inside? Are you just going through the motions? There are at least two things you can do to help root out the influence of Herod in your life:
a. Give your Life to Jesus. (Rom. 12:1)
• Romans 12:1 HCSB  Therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, I urge you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God; this is your spiritual worship.

When you give your entire life over to Jesus Christ, this ultimate demonstration of worship is very pleasing to God - and we drive a stake into the heart of Herod’s influence in our life.

1) **Power** loses its grip because we’ve humbly deferred to the King of Kings.

2) **Possessions** are no longer ours, they belong to God. We become mere managers of what He’s given.

3) **Prestige** has no pull, because we are living to please God.

4) **Paranoia** flies out the window because when God is for us, who can be against us?

   Herod refused to make the 5-mile trip from Jerusalem to Bethlehem to worship the King of Christmas. He was content to keep his distance. He didn’t want to go and have his own kingship challenged. He was so close -- and yet so far away.

   I suspect that some of you are close to understanding the true meaning of Christmas as well. Friends, I encourage you to take the trip. As you do, you’ll come face-to-face with a powerful demonstration of God’s outrageous love -- a love that can liberate you. And, as you search for Jesus, you’ll find in Him all that you are looking for.

   You gotta serve somebody. Who will it be? You see, once you transfer ownership of your life from the influence of Herod the Scrooge to the Christ of Christmas, you will experience freedom from sin and selfishness. With the Ultimate Ruler leading the direction of your life, you can be transformed from a Grinch who focuses only on getting, to a Giver who puts God and others first.

b. **Give to the Least of these this Christmas.**

   Many years after Jesus was born, He taught His followers an important lesson on how they could honor Him. In one of the most riveting and hard-hitting passages in all of Scripture, Jesus said in Matthew 25:40,

   “…Whatever you did for one of the least of these…you did it unto me.”

   In essence, Jesus is saying that if we want to worship and honor Him, then we better do some things for the forgotten people of our society: those who are in prison, those who are hungry, those in retirement centers, widows and orphans. When we serve people like this, we are actually serving the Christ of Christmas.

Conclusion:

   Two kings:

   One would do anything to gain power, even kill his own family and hundreds of baby boys but lost it all in the end.

   The other set aside His right to power and dedicated Himself to serving others – even laying down His life for us. And He will be coming back as King of kings and Lord of lords.

   When it came to the management of power, there was only one thing King Herod and King Jesus shared in common: They both believed there was nothing that bloodshed couldn’t cure.

   Which king do you choose to rule over you?