

Darkness Fights Back

Matthew 2:13-23

Introduction

If I were to ask you to name ...

“the man who hated Christmas”

... who would come to mind?

It may be that your first thought was Ebenezer Scrooge, the man who made the phrase “Bah humbug” famous.

- Scrooge was, in the words of Charles Dickens “a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous, old sinner! Hard and sharp as flint... secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster.”
 - Scrooge did indeed hate Christmas. He associated it with reckless spending, needless charity, and workers who wanted paid for doing no work.
 - Good guess.

Or maybe your first thought was the Grinch, the green creature who tried to steal Christmas from all the Whos down in Whoville because he could not stand to see those people happy.

- The Grinch, as you know, was very ill-natured and downright mean, probably because his heart was “two sizes too small.”

And while both of those options may have hated Christmas when we first met them, by the end of their stories, they came around and were two of the biggest fans of Christmas.

But no, I'm not thinking about either of those two. The man I am thinking about went to his grave still hating Christmas. The man I am thinking about would never have his life story made into a Hallmark movie.

- His name is King Herod and we met him again in today's Gospel text.
 - Unlike Scrooge and Grinch, King Herod was a real person, not some fictional character from literature.
 - A real-life, Christmas hating monster.
 - A man whose life was filled with the kind of darkness we have been talking about this entire Advent season.

Who was Herod?

- Herod the Great was appointed as “King of Judea” by Mark Anthony in 40 B.C.
- After a three-year civil war his power was never really challenged.
- Historians regard him as an effective, but cruel, authoritarian ruler.
- He was not a very nice man.
 - In a fit of rage he had his wife executed

- And in 7 B.C. he had two of his sons killed because he saw them as a threat to his throne.
- Before Herod's death, a third son was executed for the same reason.

This “man who hated Christmas” is the same Herod who tried to kill Jesus. That's the story we read about today.

I titled this sermon “Darkness Fights Back” because I want you to remember that even though Jesus has come, the final battle for our souls is not yet over. There is still plenty of darkness in our world.

- And that darkness will continue to exist until Jesus comes the second time.
- So, to use the imagery of this sermon series, we can accurately say:

The Light of the world has come, but the darkness fights on.

Right after John the Gospel writer gave us the most famous verse in the Bible:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

John writes ...

This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. (John 3:19-20)

Herod was one of those people. The Light of the World was a threat to him. He was King, and he had no tolerance for anyone else who claimed that title or who got in the way of his agenda. And that included the Messiah.

When Herod heard that the Old Testament Scriptures prophesied about a future King, he knew that his days were numbered.

- He knew that this Baby just might be the One of whom the prophets had spoken.
- And if that was true, Herod believed that when the Messiah came things would be different. The kind of power exercised would lose all its meaning.
- But, when the Messiah comes, everything would be turned upside down.
 - When the Messiah rules as King, wealth and power will no longer be what matters most. Instead, righteousness and kindness will be what is important.

Most of the nation was dreaming about the day when the Messiah would come. Herod was dreading it.

Herod was the first person to hate Christmas and be disturbed by the event, but he is not the last. There are many people just like him, who hate Christmas because they don't like the idea of Jesus being a King over their lives.

- Oh, they don't mind the celebrations of Christmas. They don't mind the parties, the family gathers, the presents...
- But the message of Christmas is threatening.

Oh, they are not really threatened by the Baby Jesus; He is kind of cute. But, like Herod, they are very much afraid of King Jesus.

The heart of the Christmas message is more – much more—that a Baby has been born in Bethlehem. It is that the promised King has been born.

- And, if the King is here, we are called to worship him.
- That's those Wise Men came.

Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him. (Matthew 2:2)

One writer says:

I'm afraid some of the people who sing, "O come, let us adore Him, Christ the Lord," really have no intention of doing that, and if they realized what the words meant, they would probably not want to sing the song. Many folks have no more desire to acknowledge Jesus as their King than Herod did. Though they may hang up Christmas lights and put presents under the tree, they hate the true meaning of Christmas, that Jesus the Messiah and King has come.

This is an idea that is probably going to get unpacked more in our upcoming Lenten season. I am strongly considering a Lenten theme based on three words in the Lord's Prayer:

Thy Kingdom Come

The kingship of Jesus is a tension for many people, both inside and outside the church. We often think about what it means to live as a citizen of Jesus' Kingdom. Let's take a closer look at what it should mean when we claim that Jesus is our King.

1: IF JESUS IS OUR KING, HE EXPECTS US TO BE LOYAL TO HIM

In the traditional marriage vows there is a phrase which says "forsaking all others." That is what King Jesus expects of us. He will not allow us to continue to serve other kings. He will not share our allegiance with anything or anyone else.

- That means, for example, that we are to be more loyal to Him than to any other human being.

There are many other things which compete with King Jesus for our allegiance. There is nothing wrong with loyalty to country, to a political party, to a football team, or to a church. It is good to make commitments to these things. But again, none of these should ever be allowed to interfere with our loyalty to King Jesus.

2: IF JESUS IS OUR KING, HE EXPECTS US TO SUBMIT TO HIS AUTHORITY

He wants us to do things His way, not our way.

In other words, if Jesus is my King, that means I can't be king.

That is maybe the hardest part to swallow. Most of us want to be the captain of our own ship. We tend to want ourselves on the throne of our lives, rather than having Christ on the throne. But, if we are going to honor Jesus as our King, then we cannot be in charge. To be a Christian is to be under new management. That is tough, because some things in life will probably be different, some things will probably have to change, if Jesus is in charge.

- For example, if I am in charge, I don't always forgive those who I think have hurt me. I try to pay them back sometimes. But, if Jesus is in charge, I can't do that. Then I have to be willing to forgive and have to be committed to not trying to get back at people.
- If I am in charge, some gossip and a little white lie once in a while is very acceptable. But, if Jesus is in charge, those things have no place in my life.
- If I am in charge, I base decisions on what I think I want to do. If Jesus is in charge, then what is best for others and what brings glory to God are the things that determine what I need to do. Things can be very different, if Jesus is the King.

In some ways there are really two sides to the Christmas story.

- The first is the good news of great joy which shall be for all people. A Savior is born, His name shall be called Jesus for He will save His people from their sins. Emmanuel has come and God is with us. That is a beautiful side and it is so true and wonderful.
- But there is also another side. If we are to celebrate the true meaning of Christmas, then we need to say, "Because Jesus the King has come, I am willing to submit to His rule."

When we do both, we experience the light of the world in all the dark places of our lives.

John's Gospel says:

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. (John 1:5)

APPLICATION

Herod was an evil man, and he did everything he could possibly do to stop the Light of the World from shining. But no matter how powerful evil is, God's plan will be fulfilled. His purpose will be accomplished.

As someone said, "There ain't no use in tryin' to beat God." Herod could not stop Christmas any more than Ebenezer Scrooge or The Grinch could. Friends, that is great comfort to those of us in this room.

As John Calvin said,

Though hostile forces rage and chaos threatens, God is King. Therefore His people are safe. (John Calvin)

Since we are Lutherans, let me point you to words written by Luther in a hymn you know well:

Though hordes of devils fill the land
All threatening to devour us,
We tremble not, unmoved we stand,
They cannot overpower us.
Let this world's tyrant rage;
In battle we'll engage!
His might is doomed to fail;
God's judgment must prevail!
One little Word subdues him.
(A Mighty Fortress, v. 3. Reprinted by permission.)

Amen