

**December 3, 2017 BUCYRUS UNITED METHODIST CHURCH  
FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT**

**“KEEPING HEROD IN CHRISTMAS”**

**Pastor Becky Smithey**

**Scripture: Matthew 2:1, 7-8, 16-18**

It's been very popular in the last few decades or so to say something to the effect of: “Let's Keep Christ in Christmas.” Amid the swirl of Christmas tree decorations, the frenzy of shopping and Santa Claus, Jesus sometimes seems to get lost in the mix. But Jesus is the Reason for the Season!!!

Jesus is to be our central focus. And in order that we don't get caught up in just a feel-good sort of Christmas story, it's important to remember that the people and events that surround Jesus' birth have powerful spiritual meanings as well. There are shepherds and wise men, Mary and Joseph, angels and the innkeeper—even the evil King Herod. And we learn from all of them.

So God calls us to remember, as we look at some of the different parts of the Christmas story—even some parts that we might hope to forget. That's why it's important to keep, even King Herod—The Man Who Tried to Kill Christmas—in Christmas.

Herod “The Great,” as he was known, was a bad man; a cruel man; an evil man, who thought nothing of killing members of his own family. If Herod suspected that anyone might be a rival to his power, that person was immediately put to death. And the older Herod got, the more paranoid he became. He murdered his wife and his mother-in-law. He killed his oldest son, and two other sons. Augustus, the Roman Emperor, had said that it was “safer to be Herod's pig than to be Herod's son.”

When Herod realized his own death was near, Herod ordered the arrest of all the leading and most beloved citizens of all the villages. Then they were to be slaughtered at the exact same moment that Herod died—so that the nation would be plunged into mourning at the time of his death.

So it should come as no surprise that when Herod heard that Jesus, “the newborn king of the Jews” had come into the world that he became very “troubled.” And that he eventually “sent soldiers to kill all the male children in Bethlehem and in all the surrounding territory who were two years old and younger...” in order to get rid of King Jesus.

Just picture the soldiers breaking down the doors of every house in Bethlehem, killing all the babies right in their mother's arms. The story explodes with grief!!! But it's the way the world was, and it's the way the world is now.

Across the centuries, Herod has become a symbol of evil. We may want to forget that Herod is part of the Christmas story. But let's keep Herod in Christmas to remind us that Jesus came

into this world as a baby with a “price on His head.” Let’s keep Herod in Christmas to remind us just how desperately we need a Savior in this world which is so full of evil!

On December 14, 2012, a young man named Adam Lanza shot his mother 4 times with a .22 caliber rifle. Then it was off to the school where (according to reports) he once had been a relatively happy child, packing four other guns and nearly 500 rounds of ammunition. He fired more than 150 shots from another rifle before turning a 10mm Glock pistol on himself once police arrived. In the meantime, he had slaughtered 20 first grade children along with 6 adults. Police have been unable to find any motive for the murders.

The killings in Newtown, about 60 miles outside New York, happened less than five months after a similar bloodbath at a movie theater in Aurora, Colorado, outside Denver. Some of us might like to think that evil is long ago and far away, like Nero feeding Christians to the lions in Rome or Hitler herding millions of people into the gas chambers in Europe. But at almost any given moment, it seems, the headlines tell us of another slaughter of the innocents.

Evil around the globe comes crashing into our living rooms. A dictator in Zimbabwe grabs land and seals off the water that brings life to it, causing hundreds of thousands of human beings to die of starvation. Young Palestinian terrorists strap dynamite around their waists, blowing themselves up in a crowded Jerusalem mall. In return, Israeli planes bomb Palestinian schools and places of worship. Civil strife in Sudan slaughters thousands of women and children. Right here in the great metropolis of Bucyrus, it seems that there are tragedies that happen every day. Overdoses seem to be the topic of conversation.

There is evil in the world. And evil is not limited to the Herods, Hitlers or even the Adam Lanza’s of history. We are all capable of great evil. Adam and Eve dramatize humankind’s rebellion from God in the beginning. Instead of God’s way, they did it their way. And their farmer son, Cain, murdered his rancher brother, Abel. Biblical history and all of human history is filled with evil and its consequences.

In Romans 3, we are told that we have all sinned and have fallen short of God’s glory. In Luke 11, Jesus instructs us that we are to pray, “forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.” We are desperate for a Savior. We are desperate for Someone powerful enough to save us from our sins...to forgive us our sins...and to turn our hearts away from self-seeking evil and toward God and compassion for others. Like a drowning person crying for help, we plead for a Savior—for One who can save us from evil, turn us from our sinful selves, root out the “Herod” from our hearts.

Christmas is the hinge of history. Bethlehem marks the encounter between God’s goodness and humankind’s inhumanity toward one another. It’s the encounter between salvation and self-centered sin, between God and evil, between the Savior and the Satanic Herod.

Jesus Christ was born into the real world—our world—a world where women and children are brutalized...where men are machine-gunned...where babies are murdered—a world riddled with sin and evil. It's a world where children go hungry, the rich get richer and poor get poorer.

The story, the reality of Christmas is not all tinsel, sugar plums, and bright colored wrapping. Actually, it's none of that. The reality of Christmas is that God loves us so much that He came down into this muck to be with us, to be like us in order to save us!

And it wasn't easy. Jesus was born in a feeding trough in a stinky stable. His parents were peasants. Jesus was born poor and homeless. He was wrapped in dirty cloths. And even though the magi came from the east to Jerusalem, because they had seen "his star" and they wanted to honor "the newborn king of the Jews," the world resisted His Kingship.

In Matthew 2:3, we are told that "When King Herod heard [that Jesus had been born], he was troubled, and everyone in Jerusalem was troubled with him." Everyone in Jerusalem wasn't just troubled over Jesus' birth because King Herod was troubled—they were troubled deep down within themselves. As we are told in John 1:11, "The light came to his own people, and his own people didn't welcome him."

The reality of Christmas is that the Light of Christ was born into the darkness of sin and sin did not want anything to do with Him! Sin tried to extinguish the Light.

Theologian N.T. Wright says, "I was once preaching at a big Christmas service where a well-known historian, famous for his skepticism towards Christianity, had been persuaded to attend by his family. Afterwards, he approached me, all smiles. 'I've finally worked out,' he declared, 'why people like Christmas.'" Wright continues, "'Really?' I said. 'Do tell me.' 'A baby threatens no one,' he said, 'so the whole thing is a happy event which means nothing at all!'"

Wright goes on, "I was dumbfounded. At the heart of the Christmas story is a baby who poses such a threat to the most powerful man around that he kills a whole village full of other babies in order to try and get rid of him. At the heart of Christmas story is a baby who will be the Lord of the whole world. Within a generation, his followers will be persecuted by the Empire as a danger to good order. Whatever else you say about Jesus, from his birth onwards, people certainly found him to be a threat. In fact, the shadow of the Cross falls over the story from this moment on."

Jesus Christ was born in a land and at a time of trouble, tension, violence and fear. Forget about all thoughts of peaceful Christmas scenes. Before the Prince of Peace had learned to walk and talk, He was a homeless refugee with a price on His head.

Nonetheless, in Jesus, even when things are there darkest, we see the fulfillment of Scripture. This is how our Redeemer was to appear; this is how God said He would go about liberating His people, and bringing justice to the whole world.

There is no point in the God of Love to arrive in the world in comfort when the world is in misery. There would be no point in Jesus having an easy life when the world suffers violence and injustice!

If Jesus is God-With-Us, He must be “with us” where the pain is. And so He is. And so He is. Jesus experienced all the pain and difficulty of life that you and I experience. Jesus comes and meets us where we are. Jesus meets the drug addict in the meth house. Jesus meets the drunk in the gutter. Jesus meets the prostitute on the streets. Jesus meets us at rock bottom. God is always with us, always pursuing us, always seeking to save us, always loving us no matter where we find ourselves.

Where are you right now? Wherever you are, Jesus is right there with you calling you out of the muck and sin of this life...calling you to follow Him into new life...into a life of relationship with God and love for humankind.

May a spirit of peace and joy flood our souls! Why?

Because God came into Herod’s world—our world, your world, my world—to change evil into goodness, hatred into love, violence into peace, and sin into salvation.

Let’s keep Herod in Christmas in order to avoid sentimentalizing and candy-coating Christmas. Let’s keep Herod in Christmas to remember that a world which is saturated in sin desperately needs a Savior who can transform human hearts. Let’s allow Jesus’ love to root out the evil in our hearts, in our city, in our world. Let’s live into our calling to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world! Praise God. Amen.