

So we're going to give a shout out to the history nerds amongst us this morning by spending a little time with the worst and allegedly mad monarchs of all time. Let's start with some of the obvious—Caligula. You may know some facts about him, but did you know that he banned the mention of goats in his presence and attempted to get his horse elected to a position on his council. Ivan the Terrible of Russia, the name kind of says it all, but the dude murdered her own son and heir in a fit of rage by hitting him with a pointed staff. Richard III of England allegedly, and in my opinion most definitely, murdered his own nephews all so they couldn't threaten his claim to the throne. Charles I was such an awful king that for the first time ever an English king was tried and executed and resulted in Parliament *abolishing* the monarchy for a time.

And then there's everyone's favorite monarch: Henry VIII. Right off the bat, yup, killed two of his wives. He was so dismissive of one of his wives because he found her ugly that he basically sent her off to live on her own because he didn't want to look at her, and then he executed the officer of his court that helped manufacture the marriage. His reign saw the introduction of the job "Groom of the Stool" and with the well-known girth of old Henry, I'll let you all figure out what this man's job was. He was brutish and boisterous, insisting upon participating in jousts and games, even

when he wasn't physically capable. He dissolved monasteries and fired or killed people willy nilly. Honestly, how this man acquired one wife let alone six is pretty astounding but power is attractive.

Yet, for all of Henry's foibles, there are a couple of rulers who could give him a run for his money...and one of those is a main feature in our gospel this morning. Herod the Great—the father of the Herod who would help send Jesus to death—is, like all monarchs, a complicated figure. He was astoundingly capable when it came to building projects, helping rebuild and expand the Temple in Jerusalem, building a massive harbor complex along the Mediterranean, and building mountaintop fortresses throughout Judea. He did help Jewish men become exempt from serving in the Roman army, supported the Olympic games (yes they were a thing even back then), and averted a regional famine. However...he also ruthlessly killed anyone who threatened his claim to the throne, including his first wife and three of his sons, he instituted near impossible levels of taxes, and then we have the events of the gospel, which would culminate in the slaughter of the innocents all in the name of finding the baby born under the sign of a star who was destined to be king of the Jews. But how do we get there?

Matthew's gospel is the only one that gives us the layout of events which lead to Mary and Joseph becoming refugees, seeking asylum in

another country, fleeing from the tyranny of a mad ruler who wants nothing more than to find their son and destroy him. We have a tendency to think that the wise men are rolling into the Christmas story hot on the heels of the shepherds and angels, but that timing doesn't particularly line up. Most likely, what we have is the wise men becoming aware of the star that rose at Jesus' birth and then following that star for a couple of years before arriving in the Holy Land. Call it foolish, call it logical, once they get to Jerusalem the first place they go to find information is to the king. They ask Herod, most likely knowing nothing about him, if he has heard of this baby born king of the Jews whose coming was heralded by the stars themselves.

For all of Herod's foibles, the man had one heck of a poker face. He calmly and astutely tells the wise men to go find the baby with his blessing and then to come back and tell him where he is so that he too can go and worship this new king. Remember the part of history that said Herod mercilessly killed his own family members who threatened his throne? Yeah, this isn't going to go well. The wise men go, they find Jesus, they bring their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, they worship this toddler king, and then an angel appears to them and tells them just what is about to go down. The angel tells them to go home by a different road, to protect their own lives and the life of this child and most likely his parents. Our

gospel stops before the story relates what happens next. The same angel warns Mary and Joseph that they need to flee to Egypt because Herod is about to go on a rampage, killing all children under the age of two throughout the country in order to prevent *anyone* from taking his throne.

All of this has the makings of a Martin Scorsese movie. It's visceral and awful, filled with power-hungry, mad people who want nothing more than to remain in power, fueled by ambition, greed, and rage. And yet...this is where language kind of fails us, because what does the gospel tell us about Herod's feelings when it comes to this situation, that he was frightened, or better translated...he was troubled. Troubled. I'm troubled when I'm running late in the morning. I'm troubled when I don't know what to make for dinner. Troubled doesn't even remotely seem to cover the rage that is about to lay waste to an entire generation of children. And yet that's what we have. Herod was troubled. He was troubled and so he lost his mind with murder, madness, and terror. And maybe it seems like a small thing, but this little word, troubled has fascinated me all week, because Herod isn't the only one in the gospels who ever experiences this emotion.

When Jesus arrives in Bethany after the death of Lazarus and is confronted with Mary weeping at his feet, declaring that none of this would have happened if he had been there. Jesus is troubled. When Jesus kneels in

the Garden of Gethsemane in the hours before his death, knowing that time is short, knowing his arrest is imminent, he is troubled. When Jesus sits around a table with his closest friends and reveals that one of them will betray him and another will deny him, he is troubled. Yet, how does Jesus respond to each of these moments? He goes to the tomb, weeps with his friends, and dares to shatter the chains of death by raising Lazarus. He gives over his life to God, trusting that all of this will be done for the glory of God and for the good of all humankind. He promises his friends that they won't be alone, that he will send them an advocate, that Spirit will always be with them and will lead them in ways of joy and peace. Where a troubled Herod is a dangerous Herod, a troubled Jesus is a Spirit-filled, life giving Jesus.

Now, I recognize that we are dealing with two very disparate ends of the troubled spectrum here: madness on one end, the Messiah on the other, and yet...there is something here, because, frankly, it just feels like more and more we live in a troubled world. I mean mere hours into a new year, with people filled with hope and joy for a fresh start, we were facing the reality of a terrorist attack. Daily it feels like we are hearing more and more threats of war, countries wanting to flex their muscle and expand their territory regardless of the impact on human life. Cars explode. Everyday seems to come with new possibilities of a squeezing out of rights for

women, members of the LGBTQIA+ community, immigrants and refugees, truly anyone who is in a minority or disenfranchised. And it can all just leave you feeling, well, troubled. Troubled at heart, troubled in your spirit, and begging the question...what do we do?

More often than not, while obviously not to the absolute Herod extreme, our reactions fall more on the Herod end of the spectrum. We hunker into our own hearts, build up our walls, protect our own, and ignore the world around us. If we are safe, if we are cared for, if we are protected, then that is all that matters. What happens to others, happens to them, but I can make sure that *I* am ok. We operate from a position of solitude, as though we're backed into a corner, and are no longer responsible for our actions, the words we spew out and the people we ignore. And yet, all the while we continue to maintain that we are the body of Christ. We are the people of God, following the same light that the wise men initially followed, in the hopes of finding our king and worshipping him. Even though we have zero interest in being in the world in any way that resembles who Jesus came and called us to be.

I am not a big one for resolutions. Let's be real, most of them are broken within the first few weeks, and yet, that doesn't mean that we cannot set an intention within our hearts. Because even though I wish it wasn't the

case, I don't see the world ceasing to be troubling, I don't see that decreasing, and so if the world is not going to change, the only option we have is to change how we operate within it, how we respond to it. Maybe this year becomes our year of settled hearts, attuned to the needs of our neighbor, striving to respond in love, grace, and kindness, striving to live with hope, with peace, with an eye towards seeing our neighbor's as fellow children of God who might just be as troubled as we are and who are in need of a loving word and a kind hand.

In the hours before his death, Jesus told the disciples to not let their hearts be troubled, to believe in him, to believe in who has promised to be. In this, the year of our Lord 2025, your heart may be troubled, and that's ok, honestly it's understandable, and yet...Jesus remains, our king remains, his light remains calling us out into the world to serve with dignity, live with love, and seek to be ones to untroubled the hearts of our neighbor. As we enter into this new year, may we ask what we are bringing forward to worship our king with? Love or hate? Trouble or fear? The light which shines in the east is still shining, but it is shining within our hearts and its up to us if we are going to hoard that light, keep it to ourselves, or use it as a means of grace to diminish the trouble of the world and let the light and promise of a child born for all of us shine. **AMEN!!!**