

Sermon for Sunday, December 20, 1981, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, MO 63105

"ROADS THAT LEAD TO BETHLEHEM"

The Road that Herod Took
St. Matthew 2:7-18

Text: "...and he sent them to Bethlehem, 'Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.'" St. Matthew 2:8

Let me begin this morning by telling you about a man named Josephus. Josephus was a commanding officer in the Jewish army that rebelled against Rome between 66 and 70 A.D. After being captured by the Romans he not only managed to escape execution, he actually ended up in Rome on a pension and lived until some time after 100 A.D. The reason I am telling you about Josephus is because of his writings after he got to Rome. His first book was composed of seven parts and was entitled History of the Jewish War Against Rome. His second book had 20 sections and was entitled Jewish Antiquities. Now, the fact is, most of the writings of the first century A.D. did not survive. For some writing to be preserved and handed down for centuries, there had to be some compelling reason for someone to take charge of the preservation. But who would be interested in preserving the writings of Josephus? The answer is the Christian Church. You see, in his book Jewish Antiquities Josephus has a passage about Jesus. That's why the church preserved the writings of Josephus.

However, as it turned out, there was another benefit in keeping the works of Josephus. You see, it is from his writings that we have most of our information about the rulers during the New Testament days, and especially information about Herod and his family. The information about Herod and his descendants is not very flattering. As a matter of fact, the things that went on in the lives of Herod and his family make our modern soap operas look like Sunday School material!

It would take us too far afield this morning to discuss how Herod the Great, as he was known, came into power. Suffice it to say that he became king through deceit, intrigue, and other questionable tactics. He was not really a Jew by race. His parents had become converts to Judaism and Herod had no real loyalty to the Hebrews. In no sense of the word could he be considered a Jewish King.

Let me tell you what kind of a person Herod was. As King of Judeah Herod had the power to appoint the High Priest of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. He was forced very reluctantly to make his 16 year old brother-in-law High Priest at one point. Actually, the Jews were pleased. The boy had important Jewish blood from his mother's side and when he officiated at the temple, the people gave him great public acclaim. Unfortunately for the boy, Herod wasn't happy about that. He didn't want any threat to his popularity or to his authority. So shortly thereafter he invited the boy to visit him at Jericho. Since the day was hot, they all went swimming and Herod, pretending to be playing, dunked the boy in the water until he drowned.

Herod had ten wives, one of whom was his most favorite. However, since he suspected her of unfaithfulness, he had her murdered. He distrusted his own

sons and had three of them executed, one of them just five days before his death. He was a cruel man without compassion and had no hesitation to dispose of anyone who stood in his way.

Therefore, when we come to the Christmas story as told by Matthew, the Herod we meet there is true to character. The Bible says he is troubled when the wise men ask about a child born to be king of the Jews. He has a secret meeting with the wise men to pry information as to when the star appeared. He makes a deal with them pretending he wants to come and worship the child provided they will come and tell him where the child may be found. Then, when God sends the wise men off in another direction, Herod is furious. The Bible says he was in a rage. So he sends his troops to Bethlehem and every baby in the area two years old or under is slaughtered. How many children did Herod kill? People who have studied the probable population density of Bethlehem in that time estimate as few as twenty and probably no more than forty. Nevertheless, it was a cruel and bitter thing for Herod to do. Yet, it was entirely in keeping with his personality.

The sad thing about the whole episode was the fact that Herod was getting old and was already stricken with a fatal disease. In perhaps a matter of weeks he would be dead and his sons would be fighting over his throne. Yet, with so little time left and facing eternity, Herod still fought to squash any threat to his power with ruthless cruelty. Sick and dying not only did he order the execution of the helpless infants, he even ordered the execution of one of his own sons. One cannot but hear the echo of the words Jesus would speak, "What shall it profit a man if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" (Mark 8:36)

Do you think Herod meant to die unrepentant and unsaved? I don't think anyone in his right mind would do that deliberately. Someone has said, "If I live my life as though there is a heaven and then die and find there is no heaven, I have lost nothing. But if I live my life as though there were no heaven and then die and find there is a heaven, I have lost everything." No, I don't think Herod meant to die unrepentant and unsaved. He had been raised in the Jewish tradition. He knew of the prophesies of the Messiah. Yet, in spite of that he did what he did. Why was that?

Do you think it may be that after a life-time of rejecting God, of disobeying the commandments, of lack of fidelity to Jewish standards and the laws of God that he had developed a pattern he could not break? Do you think he became the victim of his own habits and attitudes?

I suspect there are some of us here this morning who are doing what Herod did. We are not living according to the laws of God. We are disobeying his commandments. We are unrepentant and unsaved. Yet, I'm also sure that if each of us were asked if he wanted to go to heaven when he died, each would answer, "yes". But can we break our patterns, our habits and our attitudes? Will we at some future time be able to change and suddenly become the persons God calls us to be? Well, we may think so--or hope so. But is it possible that--like Herod--we will find in the end that we are prisoners, unable to change? Are we not running an eternal risk to wait--to delay--to put off? Are there any changes you need to make in your life this morning? Are there some things you need to quit doing--or begin to do--to be the person God calls you to be? If you don't respond--if you keep on being what you are this

morning--will there be any eternal consequences? And if you plan to change some time--tomorrow, down the road, later--do you have any assurance that you really can be different? Are you willing to run that risk?

Let me say in a special word to you men this morning who are husbands and fathers. God has called you to be the spiritual leader in your home. God has called you to be the spiritual cover for your family. Are you doing that? If you are not giving an example to your children, if you are not giving spiritual guidance in your home, if you are not leading your family in the ways of the Lord, what will be the consequences? You see, what spiritual guidance you give--or fail to give--may have tremendous consequences not only to your children, but to your grandchildren and on beyond. Let me share with you what happened spiritually to the descendants of Herod.

In Matthew 14:1-12(also Mark 6:17-18 and Luke 3:19-20) we are told how John the Baptist was put to death by Herod. This was Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great. He had divorced his wife because he became enamored with the wife of his half-brother and when John denounced him, he ended up slaying the Baptist. Later on when Jesus was on trial, Pilate--learning that Jesus was a Galilean--sent him to Herod Antipas who happened to be in Jerusalem at the time. (Luke 23:6-12) Herod the Great had attempted to kill the baby Jesus, but how did his son, Herod Antipas treat him? The Bible says, "And Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him; then, arraying him in gorgeous apparel, he sent him back to Pilate."

Again, in Acts 12:1-23, we are told of a Herod who persecuted the church and who killed James the Apostle while throwing Peter in prison. When an angel released Peter, Herod had the guards executed. The Bible says on one occasion he made a speech and the people cried out, "The voice of a God not a man." Since this Herod did not give God the glory, the Bible says he was eaten by worms and died. This was Herod's grandson.

Again, in Acts 25:13-27 we are told of Paul speaking to King Agrippa and his sister, Bernice. History records that Agrippa had an incestuous relationship with Bernice and that later she became the mistress of a Roman leader. These two degenerate people were the great grandchildren of Herod.

Yes, Herod the Great knew of the birth of Jesus. He even knew its significance. Yet because of hardened habits of greed and self-interest when he took the road to Bethlehem he had only murder and destruction in his heart. That was the spiritual legacy he gave his children and his children's children. Is it any wonder that even his great grandchildren were suffering the spiritual consequences of an ungodly ancestor?

Well, what sort of spiritual legacy will we leave our children--and their children? Do you want your children and your grandchildren to be the kind of person you are, to have the same spiritual values you have? Or could it be that you desire for them much more than you have for yourself?

That's a hard question, isn't it? But the fact is, our families can only build on the foundation we lay. What sort of spiritual heritage are we giving our children? You see, Christmas is terribly important. It is a dividing point for all of history. One way or the other, all of us travel some road to Bethlehem. We can travel a road like the shepherds or the wise men who went

there to worship. Or we can travel the road like the shepherds or the wise men who went there to worship. Or we can travel the road that Herod took--the road that was denial and rejection, greed and self-centeredness. Well, which road are you traveling to Bethlehem?

The world called him Herod the Great. But he wasn't great in the eyes of God. He left his family and his children a legacy of spiritual disaster. What legacy will we leave for our family and our descendants yet unborn? What road will we take to Bethlehem?