

King Herod & the Holy Innocents

Revelation 1:4b-8 Romans 8:31-39

Matthew 2:1-18 John 15:18-24

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Whenever you hear the name **Herod** in your Bible reading, you know that something *extremely evil* is about to happen. It is a name that is synonymous with murder, incest, and iniquity. Herod the Great killed his wife, and then three of his sons¹. He has a complicated family tree that is full of incest and adultery. This is the family that beheaded John the Baptist when John condemned them for their wicked immorality. And King Herod is the one that killed all the little boys in Bethlehem in his attempt to kill the infant Jesus.

We heard that story today in the Gospel of Matthew. The Wise men – the “Magi” – followed the miraculous star to Jerusalem expecting to find the King of the Jews there. Eventually, they learn He will be born in Bethlehem and not Jerusalem; but in the process, King Herod is alerted and becomes disturbed and feels threatened. When the Wise Men do not return, he sends soldiers into Bethlehem to kill all the little boys two years old and younger. He is hoping to wipe out this threat of another King.

*I'm not sure that we could even imagine the atrocity that this is. I remember when I was younger and not married reading this and knowing it academically; understanding the story but not thinking about it with too much emotion. But then the first time I read it after getting married and after the birth of our daughter Kristen, it literally took my breath away. I cannot even imagine soldiers showing up to your house to kill your baby. *It's still it takes my breath away ... and probably yours too.**

¹ A historian noted that a common saying at the time was “it was better to be Herod’s pig than to be his son.” (This is a wordplay, as “pig” and “son” sound very similar in the Greek language.)

Jeremiah foresaw this horrible and terrible tragedy, and the intense pain it would cause, *and on behalf of all the mothers that day, he wrote, “A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more.”* (Matt 2:18)”

The Holy Christian Church recognizes these little boys as the first Christian martyrs. These little boys died because of Christ². This story is known as the “Holy Innocents” in Church History.

This story teaches us about **martyrdom**. It reminds us that you will be persecuted because of Christ. Jesus warned us about it, when He said:

“If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. John 15:18-19

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. Matthew 5:10-12

Persecution is a reality for us as Christians. Perhaps you've seen it personally in your own life. It can come in many forms, you may be excluded, ridiculed, mocked, or harassed. They will label you, shun you, and punish you. Throughout history -- and even in many parts of the world today -- Christians are persecuted and their possessions are taken, they are thrown in prison, and they lose their lives because of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ³. When you hold to God's Holy Word, defend the truth of God's 10 Commandments, and proclaim the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, you can expect to be persecuted. It's an unique cross that we as Christians bear.

² Scholars widely disagree on how many children died that day (the Bible doesn't tell us). The Greek liturgy asserts 14,000 Holy Innocents, while an early Syrian list of saints asserts 64,000. Coptic sources assert 144,000. However, these numbers are huge exaggerations; those numbers are probably higher than all the people living in all of Judea at the time! Conservative Lutheran sources believe perhaps a dozen little boys at the most, since Bethlehem was such a small place. Of course, it doesn't matter the number, it was a terrible act of evil that would foreshadow Christian martyrdom.

³ If the idea of martyrdom is new to you, and you are not aware of the vast extent of Christian persecution around the world today, then you may consider looking at the website persecution.org to learn more.

Jesus Himself is described as a **martyr** in the Holy Scriptures:

Grace to you and peace from Him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the Seven Spirits who are before His throne, and from Jesus Christ **the faithful witness**, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. Revelation 1:4b-5

The word *witness* is the word **martyr** in the Greek language. A **martyr** is a *witness*; Jesus bore witness to the truth of God, like a prophet of old⁴. Jesus bore witness that

- ➡ He Himself is the Son of God, equal to the Father
- ➡ Jesus taught with divine authority and confirmed it with His mighty miracles
- ➡ Jesus condemned the Pharisees and the teachers of the law for their hypocrisy and false teaching
- ➡ Jesus bore witness to the love of God by eating with tax collectors and sinners.

Jesus is **the faithful witness, the faithful martyr**, who taught and showed the love of God for us sinful people. And for it, He was crucified. He was killed. But in His death, God was at work to reconcile the world to Himself. Because of the crucifixion of the Son of God, your sins are forgiven. You have peace with God. In the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead on the Third Day, God the Father vindicates His Son as *the faithful witness*! Everything Jesus taught was true; everything He did was good and right. He is the Son of God and the Savior of the world! Jesus is *the faithful witness* who has freed us from our sins through His death and resurrection!

The world continues to **hate Christ and His People**. What happened to Jesus and the prophets before Him, continues to happen to His People in the New Testament era. Tradition says all of the Apostles, except John, were martyred. Jesus teaches us that *people hate the light because they love their darkness and they will not come into the light because their evil deeds will be exposed* (John 3:19-20).

⁴ The Old Testament prophets were persecuted and martyred; Jesus lamented in Matthew 23, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing.” Now God has sent His Son, the long-awaited “prophet like Moses (Dt 18)”, and they will kill Him also. Remember the “Parable of the Tenants” in Matthew 21:33-46!!

As a Christian, you represent Christ. Your words of truth expose their lies. Your holy life is a sharp contrast to their rebellion and immorality. Your presence alone can create guilt within others. And unbelievers hate that, and they take it out on you. You are persecuted, excluded, ridiculed, mocked, or worse.



It's important that when you are persecuted, that you stand firm, and continue to confess the truth and live a holy life⁵.

- † Jesus told us to expect it, if it happened to Him it will happen to us.
- † Persecution is not a bad thing, nor is it a sign of sin in your life. It is actually a sign of faith, and that you are speaking the truth and living a holy life.
- † When you're persecuted, draw your strength from the Word of God. The promises of God are the solid rock on which you stand as they always point you to Christ.
- † Remember that persecution will never separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus

In your Confirmation vows, and when you joined this congregation, one of the promises you made was **“to remain faithful to God, even unto death.”** **That is what we are talking about.** Faithfulness to God in the midst of persecution.

What happened in Bethlehem long ago, when King Herod killed the “Holy Innocents”, continues today as Christians are persecuted because of the Lord Jesus Christ. *If and when **you*** are persecuted, remain faithful at all costs. Do not compromise your faith; but remember the Savior’s words

*Be faithful even unto death,
and I will give you the crown of everlasting life.*

Rev 2:10

⁵ One of the truths that is woven throughout Holy Scripture is that “faithfulness to God is more important than physical life.” It is the idea that we do not let persecution cause us to lose our faith, deny our Lord, or ignore His Word. The martyrs are honored because of their faithfulness to God, that they did not cave in to the pressure and abandoned their faith even in the face of certain death. If you are under the pressure of persecution, then remember that “faithfulness to God is more important than physical life” -- and at times that means “faithfulness to God is more important than friendships, boyfriends/girlfriends, reputation, careers, etc. . . .”

Heavenly Father,

today Lord our hearts break for those who are being persecuted for the sake of Christ, our Savior.

We remember those in our own congregation who face persecution;

and those around the world who are in danger because of their faith.

We ask that you rush to their aid with Your Word and Your Spirit,

to strengthen them to remain faithful in their time of trial.

Give them wisdom and insight,

and words of courage

and actions of love

in the midst of their persecution.

Lord be glorified in it all,

and bring many to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ through it.

We pray this in our Savior's Name,

who is the Faithful Martyr, Amen.

Revelation 1:4b-8

Grace to you and peace from Him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, 5 and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood 6 and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. 7 Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen. 8 “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.”

Romans 8:31-39

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? 32 He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? 33 Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. 34 Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. 35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? 36 As it is written, “For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.” 37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38 For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Matthew 2:1-18

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, 2 saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” 3 When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; 4 and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. 5 They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: 6 ““And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.”” 7 Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. 8 And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.” 9 After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. 11 And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. 12 And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way. 13 Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” 14 And he rose and

took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt 15 and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, “Out of Egypt I called my son.” 16 Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men. 17 Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: 18 “A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more.”

John 15:18-24

[Jesus said,] “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. 19 If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. 20 Remember what I told you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. 21 They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the one who sent me. 22 If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not be guilty of sin; but now they have no excuse for their sin. 23 Whoever hates me hates my Father as well. 24 If I had not done among them the works no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin. As it is, they have seen, and yet they have hated both me and my Father. 25 But this is to fulfill what is written in their Law: ‘They hated me without reason.’