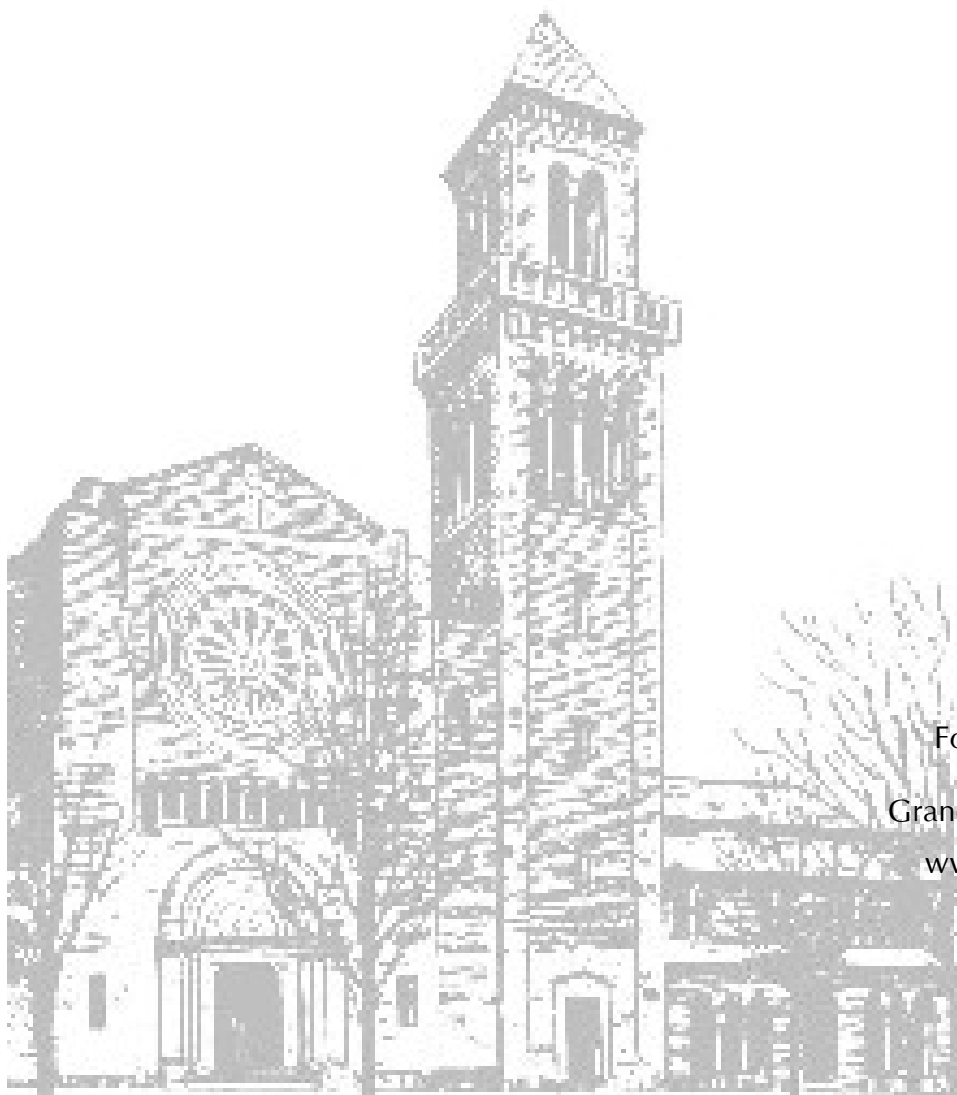


“Three Cheers for Herod”

Sunday, December 31, 2006

The Rev. Dr. W. Frederick Wooden



Fountain Street Church
24 Fountain St., NE
Grand Rapids, MI 49503
www.fountainstreet.org

Printed by
THE EXTENSION SERVICE
of
FOUNTAIN STREET CHURCH

Single Copies..... \$1.00

Copyright © 2006 by Fountain Street Church

To the reader: This sermon was only part of a service of worship with many components working together, all of which were designed to be experienced in a community context. In our "free pulpit" tradition, its concepts are intended not as truths to receive, but as spurs to your own thought and faith.

“THREE CHEERS FOR HEROD”

READING

'A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.'
And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory,
Lying down in the melting snow.
There were times we regretted
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling
And running away, and wanting their liquor and women,
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly
And the villages dirty and charging high prices:
A hard time we had of it.
At the end we preferred to travel all night,
Sleeping in snatches,
With the voices singing in our ears, saying
That this was all folly.
Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley,
Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation;
With a running stream and a water-mill beating the darkness,
And three trees on the low sky,
And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow.
Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel,
Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver,
And feet kicking the empty wine-skins.
But there was no information, and so we continued
And arrived at evening, not a moment too soon
Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory.
All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.

We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.

The Journey of the Magi, by T.S. Eliot

* * * * *

SERMON

What a week. Religiously it has been quite full. Only rarely do Christmas and New Year coincide with Hanukah (which ended on the 23rd) and the Muslim pilgrimage month of Hajj, which ends with a major holiday, Eid al Adha, today and tomorrow. And that only scratches the surface. Little did I know that this normally calm time in church life would encompass two weddings, a child dedication, and planning two memorial services. Now add in the death of our former president, and the ceremonies that are about to happen this coming week, and the swift execution of a tyrant who was the reason we are engaged in a bitter and costly war.

Yes, it has been a week to remember. But as I thought about it, last year a tsunami devastated southeast Asia the day after Christmas. A cursory look back in time at the holiday period, from December 24 through January 1, will find airline disasters, terrorist acts, battles aplenty, the death of another unelected president (Harry Truman) and a whole bunch of earthquakes.

Rarely has the Christmas season passed without its attendant horror or evil. That may seem sad, but even the story itself contains one of the greatest cruelties in all of the Bible.

“And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road. Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, ‘Get up, 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.’ ... When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men.”

It is very tempting to condemn our age as the worst in human history, and in sheer mass of misery perhaps we are. As an historian, though, I know that the difference between now and ages past is more efficiency than malevolence. Believe me, evil has ever been in the mix, even in that sweetest of stories, the Nativity. And what’s more, the evil part is the only factual part of the story. Herod is the historical person in the Nativity Story. Everything else, everything, is uncertain. Angels, virgins, Joseph, shepherds, magi, the census, the inn, are all dubious, but Herod really existed. As far as the Christmas story goes, good is myth but evil is fact.

Herod came to power by intrigue, and lived in constant fear of assassination. He

spent much of his time dispatching suspected plotters. He even had his wife and two sons killed. No wonder the Christmas story says that when he was troubled, all Jerusalem was troubled with him. When Herod was afraid, all had reason to look over their shoulders. Matthew's Herod acts entirely in character, then. When mysterious strangers say they seek the one who is born to be King of the Jews, Herod sees the danger to him, and everyone knows that Herod will do something to nip this in the bud.

History says he was nasty, and legend says he was wicked. If there is a symbol of entrenched evil, Herod is it. Even Judas is more sympathetic; he felt remorse. It would be hard to find a more pure example of villainy. He is so bad he is inhuman.

In 1941, the British poet, W. H. Auden wrote "For the Time Being – A Christmas Oratorio," a long poetic drama about the Nativity in which Herod gets the longest sustained utterance. It is too long to read here, though I wish I could. In it, Auden gives us a Herod who looks remarkably like a modern political leader. He portrays Herod as a man not a demon, an urbane and modern man.

There is no visible disorder. No crime - what could be more innocent than the birth of an artisan's child? Today has been one of those perfect winter days, cold brilliant and utterly still, there is nothing in the whole magnificent panorama of plain and mountains to indicate that the Empire is threatened by a danger more dreadful than any invasion of Tartars on racing camels or conspiracy of the Praetorian Guard.... Legislation is helpless against the wild prayer of longing that rises, day in, day out, from all these households under my protection: O God, put away justice and truth for we cannot understand them and do not want them. Eternity would bore us dreadfully. Leave thy heavens and come down to our earth.... Be interesting and weak like us, and we will love you as we love ourselves....

Today, apparently, judging by the trio who came to see me this morning with an ecstatic grin on their scholarly faces, the job has been done. 'God has been born,' they cried, 'we have seen him ourselves. The World is saved. Nothing else matters.'

One needn't be much of a psychologist to realize that if this rumour is not stamped out now, in a few years it is capable of diseasing the whole Empire, and one doesn't have to be a prophet to predict the consequences if it should.

Reason will be replaced by Revelation. Instead of Rational Law, objective truths perceptible to any... and the same for all, Knowledge will degenerate into a riot of subjective visions....

Idealism will be replaced by Materialism... Life after death will be an eternal dinner party where all the guests are twenty years old... the needs of the Materialistic Masses for some visible Idol to worship will be driven into totally unsocial channels where no education can reach it.

Justice will be replaced by Pity as the cardinal human virtue, and all fear of retribution will vanish. Every corner-boy will congratulate himself: 'I'm such a sinner that God had to come down in person to save me. I must be a devil of a fellow.' Every crook will argue: 'I like committing crimes. God likes forgiving them. Really the world is admirably arranged'....

Naturally this cannot be allowed to happen. Civilization must be saved even if this means sending for the military, as I suppose it does. How dreary... O dear, Why couldn't this wretched infant be born somewhere else? Why can't people be sensible? I don't want to be horrid...

I've worked like a slave. Ask anyone you like. I read all official dispatches without skipping. I've taken elocution lessons. I've hardly ever taken bribes. I've tried to be good. I brush my teeth every night.... I object. I'm a liberal....

It is plausible, even understandable, a small atrocity to prevent a greater catastrophe. It was ugly and unpleasant, but leaders have to do difficult things. It really does make a kind of sense, and that's what's scary. Herod's evil is not pathological, but ordinary. He is just like us. Auden's Herod is not a Hitler or a Stalin, no Mao or Pol Pot. Herod is horribly conventional. His successors are the petty bureaucrats of destruction – the Robert McNamaras and Donald Rumsfelds, who are not laughing evilly but merely calculating costs and benefits, risks and outcomes. The slaughter of the innocents could be My Lai or Haditha. In the jargon of modern defense, it was a protective reaction strike, a surgical insertion. Auden's Herod is a modern man, following modern values. He's a liberal.

Step lightly here. This is perilous ground. Far too many already indict liberalism as evil itself. Not me, the born again bleeding heart, but I am not fool enough to think liberalism is pure. Humans are fallible creatures, everyone of us. Forgetting that is the slippery slope, which means that the real source of evil is not malevolence, but innocence.

You heard me right, innocence. The vastest amount of evil gets done by innocent people, those who do not see themselves as evil. Herod was saving the country from turmoil. Nixon was only playing the game of politics. Our current administration is protecting us from terrorists. They, and all the other banal managers of modern evil, mistake intention for outcome, purpose for permission. If I do not mean evil, they think without even noticing, then how it can turn out evil?

That's the price of progress, in a sense. When people can separate themselves from their actions, when the unintended consequences are not evident, evil can flourish. Yes, there are monsters out there, but far more are the monstrosities wrought by ordinary people who, because they are thinking noble thoughts, assume their actions will be as pure. Mary Wollstonecraft told us this truth in her retelling of the Prometheus legend – Frankenstein.

We worship innocence in this culture, attaching it to the smooth-cheeked faces of

babes and children, to the weak and helpless, forgetting that this is the evil embedded in innocence itself – weakness. We hold innocent those who do no evil forgetting that they can also do no good. Such innocence can be the servant of evil, standing back for fear of getting stained or as likely out of whimpering self pity that proclaims itself too weak to act at all.

I resist Christmas, and this is why. We celebrate the innocent babe as the paragon of perfection. I reject this. Good must be wrought, done, sought, built. We live in a moral universe where none of us can claim to be innocent or uninvolved. We tell the story and stop before the awful parts, before the massacre of the children, forgetting the shocking fact that a sweet “innocent” act, being born, precipitated evil. If Jesus had not been born all those infants would have lived, right?

It is called the massacre of the holy innocents. That’s a lie. There are no holy innocents because there are no innocents at all. If there is evil to be met, it is only met by doing good. Innocent babies can do nothing. It is time we grew up and accepted the messy facts of adulthood and stopped worshipping the innocence of children.

So three cheers for Herod, who reminds us that Christmas is also about the hard, brutal, tragic fact that no one is innocent. It is as potent a truth as the one he tried to quench with blood. Like the good news of the infant god, this bad news needs repeating year after year.