

A New Kid in Town

Matthew 2:1-12

In the world of 1970's rock bands (how many sermons have you heard beginning with that phrase?), no one had it better than the Eagles. Formed in 1970, they had five number one singles and six chart-topping albums. Their first greatest hits album and the LP, *Hotel California*, rank among the top ten selling albums of the entire Twentieth Century. There's a song on the *Hotel California* album called "New Kid in Town," which is about fame, wealth, power, and how hard it is, once you've got it, to hang onto it.

The song begins with the new kid in town, the subject of everyone's attention and adoration.

Great expectations, everybody's watching you

People you meet, they all seem to know you

Even your old friends treat you like you're something new

But, by the end of the song, there's another new kid in town...

You're walking away and they're talking behind you

They will never forget you 'til somebody new comes along

Where you been lately? There's a new kid in town

Everybody loves him, don't they?

Now he's holding her, and you're still around.

Some people believe the song is about the Eagles being threatened by a new kid who had burst on the music scene in the mid-1970's, some one-hit-wonder named Bruce Springsteen.

It's lonely at the top. Everyone's trying to take your place, everyone wants to knock you down, and if you're going to stay there, you've got to be tough, ruthless, willing to do what is necessary to eliminate the competition. It's that way today; it was that way two thousand years ago, and no one understood better than the man referred to in today's scripture as "King Herod." There were actually several generations of kings named Herod, but this is the first one, known as Herod the Great, and when it came to knowing how to hold on to the top spot, Herod the Great really was the granddaddy of them all. In fact, among the many unsavory stories about this man is the fact that he killed his wife and two of his sons simply because he suspected that they might be plotting to take his throne.

Seems a bit of an overreaction, but, hey, when you're on top, you've got to do what you've got to do. So, you can understand Herod's reaction when word reaches him that some astrologers from the east have arrived in Jerusalem with a wild story about having seen and followed a star signifying, so they say, the birth of a child who is to be King of the Jews.

The Roman Senate had elected Herod to be King of the Jews about thirty years earlier, and therein lay the problem. Herod is not pretending when he expresses great interest in their story. If there's a new kid in town who poses a threat to his dynasty, he really does want to know about it. So, he calls his religious advisors and asks them where the Messiah is to be born. They do a little bible study and come back with the answer: Bethlehem, the little town six miles outside of Jerusalem from which King David himself had come.

Being the quintessential politician, Herod also knows that making nice often gets you what you want with the least amount of trouble, so, he invites the magi to meet with him, and, in his most ingratiating tone of voice, encourages them to go to Bethlehem to "search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage."

You know the rest of the story. The wise men find the child, bring him gifts fit for a king, and, being warned in a dream not to return to Jerusalem, they return home by another road.

Of course, that's not really the rest of the story. There is one more part that we do not often talk about because it is so gruesome that it kind of puts a damper on our post-Christmas glow. When Herod discovers that the magi have tricked him, he loses his temper and orders the death of all the children in and around Bethlehem two years old and under, an act that has come to be known as the Slaughter of the Innocents. But the terrible loss of life does not accomplish Herod's purpose, for Joseph had been warned in a dream that Herod planned to destroy his son, so he took Mary and Jesus and fled to Egypt before the killing took place.

I don't like to talk about that story any more than you want to hear about it, but it is important for us to be reminded of the lengths people will go when they feel their position is being threatened by the new kid in town. The political world is infamous for its stories of backstabbing and double-crossing so

that the party or person in power stays in power. The business world is full of stories of ruthless corporate executives doing what needed to be done to keep the new upstart business from taking their share of the market. The academic world is replete with stories of young upstart professors being kept in their place by the established power structure. Even the history of the Christian church is shamefully full of instances where those in power did what had to be done to eliminate anyone who threatened the status quo.

But, my point is not to look out there to see how many Herods there are in the world. My point is that we all need to look inside ourselves, because, if we're willing to be honest, we have to admit that there's a little bit of Herod in every one of us.

Not that every one of us has the capacity to do the horrendous kinds of things Herod did. However, we all have that insecurity about losing our privileged positions and perks, and we are capable of being quite cruel if we feel threatened by the new kid in town. We wouldn't actually kill someone, but we might participate in a little character assassination by passing on a juicy rumor or two, whether it happens to be true or not. We wouldn't order the slaughter of innocents, but many innocent people have been known to be hurt by those who exclude them from the family or a circle of friends because they feel threatened by them.

There is a little bit of Herod in most all of us, wanting to keep our positions of power from the new kids in town, be they new members of the family – after all, what is sibling rivalry? – or new neighbors, new classmates, or new kings. And that's what I really want to point out this morning. Of all the new kids in town by whom we feel threatened, it may just be that we are most threatened by the same new kid who made Herod so uncomfortable, Jesus.

If anyone calls us to give up the things we want to hold onto the most, it is Jesus. We say we are Christ followers, but, truth be told, there are a lot of places we won't follow him. He tells us to love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us. We don't generally find that command very appealing. He tells us to forgive those who have wronged us, as he himself did on the cross. We are often unwilling to let go of someone's indebtedness to us. He tells us to take up our cross and follow him, to be willing to suffer for him, and to live lives of sacrifice for the sake of others. We will take up our cross if it's not too heavy, preferably just a little cross on a chain we can wear around our neck that doesn't hurt, but it looks nice. He tells us to turn the other cheek and to walk the extra mile, and that doesn't feel comfortable at all. He tells us we should get rid of anything that stands in the way of following him – using even the graphic symbolism of plucking out eyes and cutting off hands, telling rich people to sell what they have if it keeps them from following him – and we say, you know, I think I'm good just the way I am.

Here's the message I'm seeing in this scripture passage today: the new kid in town that threatened Herod so badly that he killed every child under two in Bethlehem; the new kid in town whose birth we love to celebrate; the new kid in town who will become King of the Jews – it said so, right on the sign they posted above his head on the cross – that new kid wants to be king of your life and mine, too. The problem is, like Herod, we don't really want to give up control to someone else. We want to say he is the ruler of our lives, but only when his will doesn't conflict with ours.

The message of this final Sunday in the season of Christmas is this: there's a new kid in town. Will we honor him like the magi, or will we make nice like Herod, saying we want to honor him, but really have no intention of letting him take over?

Amen.

© 2009, Ken Broman-Fulks