

25 Days of Advent

Seeing Jesus Through the Eyes of the Christmas Story Characters

ADVENT DAY 17: Dec. 17 – King Herod, the Monster of Christmas

Devotional

Every story needs a villain, and the Master storyteller doesn't hold back in the Christmas story. This one has one doozy of a villain – enter King Herod.

Pretty sure your Nativity set doesn't include King Herod. But to ignore him is to not only ignore the world into which Jesus was born, but to miss an important thread in God's grand plan of redemption. For Jesus to be born during the reign of Herod might have been the worst possible time for a new king of Israel to be born. Underneath the warm glow of our Christmas is a dark thread of violence, just a hint of a cosmic war against all that is good.

In his book, *The Characters of Christmas*, Daniel Darling puts it bluntly:

At the heart of the incarnation, the story of God leaving heaven to become flesh, is the cosmic struggle between God and Satan. Ever since the devil fell from glory, he and his band of demons have had one single mission: to thwart God's plan.

They still have that mission today.

Herod was worse than the well known bad-guys of Christmas – the Grinch or Scrooge. They are merely fictitious characters. This is a true historical person known as Herod the Great. Herod was a strange mix of a clever and efficient ruler, and a cruel tyrant.

On the one hand, he was distrustful, jealous, and brutal, ruthlessly crushing any potential opposition. The Jews never accepted him as their legitimate king, and this infuriated him. On the other hand, he encouraged the development of the synagogue communities and when times were tough, he canceled taxes and supplied the people with free grain. He was also a master builder – he rebuilt and beautified the temple in Jerusalem and built Greek-style theaters, amphitheaters, and hippodromes (outdoor stadiums for horse and chariot racing). Judea prospered economically during Herod's reign. He extended Israel's territory through conquest and built fortifications to defend the Roman frontiers.

He became the governor of Galilee at the age of 25, which was a very high position for such a young man. It was the desire of the Romans to control the Jewish people in the area. So they thought Herod was the man to do it because he was so tough and cruel. And they even voted in 40 BC to give him a title. He was a villain. He was mean. He was a murderer. He constantly feared conspiracy.

He was renowned for his cruelty. He had members of his own family put to death because he saw them as potential threats to his throne. His brother-in-law, his mother-in-law, two of his own sons, and even his wife were killed by Herod. Herod was sort of like Adolf Hitler or Saddam Hussein or Muammar Kaddafi. He murdered out of spite and killed to stay in power. Life meant nothing to him.

So is it any wonder that he would order the murder of all boys aged two and under to ensure the “future king of the Jews” never made it to adulthood? He was the Roman-appointed king of the Jews and he wasn’t letting anyone take that away from him.

But he didn’t know God and surely couldn’t see how pointless such a move would be. He wasn’t as powerful as he thought. Herod may have seemed powerful. He may have initiated a culture of fear in Israel. But he was no match for the King of Kings. Like every ruler who seeks to challenge God, his attempts to kill the real King of Israel were thwarted by God. More about that when we look at Christmas through the eyes of the Wise Men.

Look Up – Connect with God

Read: Matthew 2:16-18

Key Verse: “When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.” (Matthew 2:16)

Pray: Father God, thank you for including the story of Herod within the Christmas story. We may not like what it describes, but we can certainly learn from it and see your hand at work even though evil surrounds us. May we learn to look to you always, especially when we wonder where you are in the midst of trials and war and famine and hate that permeate our world today. The story of Herod reminds us that You give us hope that it will all be overcome one day.

Look In – Family Memories

Discuss: Meditate on the ways in which we are tempted to yield to the “herod” impulses in all of us:

- How are we tempted to step on the toes of the “little people” in order to gain power?
- How are we tempted to marginalize those who get in our way?
- How do we resist the rule of Christ over our lives?

Activity:

- Advent Tree: make or select a king's crown and put it on the tree. [Download Ornaments](#) or [Ornament Ideas](#)
- Advent Garland: put the key verse on a paper/card, assign #17, and attach it to the garland twine. [Key Verses](#)
- Advent Cards: select a card and see what the activity might be (i.e., cut out paper snowflakes). [Family Activities](#)

Look Out – Connect with Others

Invite one (or more) of the kids in your neighborhood over for hot chocolate and cookies. Make them feel welcome and special, let them know your home is a safe refuge for them. You never know what God will do with that relationship later on.