

The Threat
Matthew 2:1-12
Sermon by Dan Schrock
December 28, 2014
Sunday after Christmas

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ² asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.”

³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ⁶“And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.” ⁷Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.”

⁹When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road. (NRSV)

Who would have thought that Mary would pose a threat to Herod?

King Herod was one of the great men of the world. His father was Antipater, a man who had lots of wealth and influence. His mother was a Nabataean princess. He was born in 73 BCE and died in March or April in the year 4 BCE.

Mary was one of the lesser women of the world. Like millions of other people who have trod the face of this earth, the historical record does not know does the historical record know the names of her parents. Neither does the historical record know when she was born or when she died. The *Gospel of James* says that her parents were named Anne and Joachim, but that book was written in the second century, long after Mary died, and no one is really certain that those were their names.

Who would have thought that the lowly Mary would pose a threat to the great Herod?

Herod was well-connected to some of the most famous people then living in the world. For example, Herod had visited Rome and personally knew Julius Caesar and Mark Antony. On the day that the Roman Senate declared him to be the “king of the Jews,” Herod walked out of the Senate building with his friends Julius Caesar and Mark Antony. That night, Mark Antony gave a banquet in honor of Herod, the new king of the Jews.¹

Mary had no connections to anyone in the Roman empire. She never met Julius Caesar or Mark Anthony. The Roman Senate never declared her queen of anything, and nobody in Rome gave a banquet in her honor.

Who would have thought that no-name Mary would threaten Herod, friend of famous Romans?

Herod was rich. Or maybe a more accurate way to word it is that he extracted wealth from his long-suffering subjects. The economic burden that Herod placed on his subjects was heavy. There were basically three economic impositions the average peasant bore, and to be fair, not all of them were imposed by Herod. First was the tithe paid to the temple. This tithe was of course imposed by the priests of the Jerusalem temple. Second was the tribute imposed by the Roman emperor. Third was the tax imposed by Herod.

Even so, just Herod’s taxes alone were heavy. We know this from all his building projects. Herod built Greco-Roman theatres and amphitheatres, fortresses, palaces, colonnades, and temples. He constructed a new city on the

¹ Richard Horsley, *The Liberation of Christmas: The Infancy Narratives in Social Context* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 41.

coast in honor of Caesar, which he called Caesarea. This city took twelve years to build and was an architectural wonder.² Other construction projects included the fortress at Masada, three palaces and a hippodrome in Jericho, and various projects in Samaria-Sebaste.³

Then there was the new temple in Jerusalem, begun around 20 BCE. To erect this new and more magnificent temple, Herod had to tear down the old temple and build the new one from the ground up. The temple itself was finished in only a year and a half, but the surrounding courts and out-buildings took another eighty years of work and employed a thousand masons and carpenters.⁴

As if these expensive building projects within his own kingdom were not enough, Herod also funded construction projects in other parts of the Roman empire. He provided gymnasia for Tripolis, Damascus, and Ptolemais; a wall for Byblus; halls, porticoes, temples, and marketplaces for Berytus and Tyre; theatres for Sidon and Damascus; and an aqueduct for Laodicea. On and on it went: gifts to the cities of Chios, Cos, Phaselis, Balanea, Athens, Rhodes, and Syrian Antioch. Besides these he presented large gifts—bribes, you might call them—to important people like Mark Antony and Caesar Augustus.

These buildings and gifts cost enormous sums, and the money all came from the peasants of Herod's tiny kingdom. As one historian puts it, "Herod was in fact bleeding his country and people to death."⁵

Mary, by contrast, bled no one to death. She did not extract wealth from other people in order to advance her own name, her own prestige, or her own luxurious comfort.

² Cynthia White, *The Emergence of Christianity* (Westport: Greenwood, 2007), 26.

³ Christoph Stenschke, "Judaea in the First Century AD: A Review of Recent Scholarly Contributions and Their Implications," *European Journal of Theology* 20:1 (2011), 19.

⁴ "Temple of Herod," *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/14304-temple-of-herod>, accessed November 14, 2014.

⁵ Horsley, 43-44.

Who would have thought that poor Mary would become such a threat to rich Herod?

Herod's religious loyalties were mixed. On the surface of things he was supposedly a Jew. At least that's what he told his Jewish subjects for whom he built that grand Jewish temple in Jerusalem. But in reality Herod's religious fidelity was not nearly as pure as he pretended. The truth is that in several other places outside of Jerusalem, Herod built temples to the worship of the emperor. As such, Herod invested heavily in what we would call civil religion—a civil religion that freely mixed religion and politics for the purpose of glorifying the Roman empire.

Mary never worshipped the emperor, so far as we know. She was not a civil religionist. All the stories say she was as devoted to God as anyone could be.

Who would have thought that devoted Mary would threaten Herod's easy-come, easy-go religion?

Herod was a violent man. When the Roman Senate made him king of the Jews, Herod still had to earn his kingdom. He was not able to stroll into the palace and immediately start governing. Instead he had to fight for his kingdom by defeating enemies in the region who opposed his rule. For three years Herod and his army fought those opposing forces. The last stage of Herod's military campaign was laying siege to Jerusalem with eleven battalions and six thousand cavalry. When Jerusalem finally fell, Herod's troops poured into the city and massacred the inhabitants. People were butchered in the alleys, in their houses, and while fleeing into the sanctuary of the temple.⁶ Herod finally became

⁶ Horsley, 42.

king not just in name but also in fact, yet at terrible cost to the land and the people.

Herod's violence also extended to the members of his own family. Due to intrigue, paranoia, and deception, Herod eventually murdered his second wife, Mariamne, a woman he had once loved very much, plus their two sons, and his wife's brother, mother, and grandfather.⁷

Mary was a peaceable woman. She started no wars, led no armies, wielded no swords, and killed no family members.

Who would have thought that peaceful Mary would so threaten violent Herod?

Nevertheless for Herod, Mary is a threat. What makes her so threatening to him is that she represents a frightening energy in the world which he does not understand and cannot control. Herod still regards himself as the rightful king of the Jews. Had not the Roman Senate given him that title? Was he not now sitting on the throne in Jerusalem? Then what new king were these strange Magi from the east talking about? Herod's first impulse is to strike back with subterfuge at this new king and his mother, and failing that, to strike back at them with swords. The infant king must be killed. The infant's father must be killed. And the infant's mother must be killed, because the mother might yet bear more sons who will grow up to be princes.

Mary threatens Herod because she represents God's missional energy at loose in the world. Mary has chosen to collaborate with the things God wants to accomplish, and it threatens Herod's world.

⁷ "Herod," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/263437/Herod>, accessed November 14, 2014.

Yet here lies an unexpected paradox. Even though Herod's persecution makes Mary anxious for her safety, that same persecution also shows how important Mary and her son are. A consistent theme running through the stories of Mary is how this insignificant person becomes highly significant when she says yes to God's missional invitation. What makes Mary important is collaborating with God's work in the world. She had already discovered some of her own importance in that visit from Gabriel when she consented to become pregnant. Now Herod verifies her importance in a backhanded sort of way by perceiving her as a threat that he must neutralize. In these stories, Mary's self-identity is sometimes slowly and sometimes suddenly changing. She is beginning to understand herself as a valued partner with God.

In one way or another, many of you have become part of God's mission. In your vocation, in your volunteering, or in your family life, you have linked with God in the work which God is already doing in our community. I suggest that what happened to Mary could well be happening to you too.

When we join in God's mission, our self-identity as individuals begins to shift. We perceive our worth in a new way. Our spirits rise and rejoice. Our hearts beat more quickly. Our joy blossoms.

Even if we are a threat.