

King Herod was certainly ruthless and paranoid. There is no doubt about that. He clawed his way to the top. He started out as the Governor of Galilee during the time of Julius Caesar. After Caesar's death, he switched alliances 3 times from Cassius to Marc Anthony to Augustus to always stay on the winning side. Through intrigue and through military might he crushed his rivals, and he gained the title, "Herod the Great, King of the Jews." He wasn't really a king. He had no independence. He was still a lackey of the Roman Empire. But King of the Jews was how Herod was known.

Herod was always worried about losing power. He fought off numerous attempts to dethrone him. He killed one of his wives as well as her mother and brothers. He killed three of his sons. Once when the High Priest was giving him trouble, Herod invited him to a "pool party" in his Roman style bath. Herod personally held the high priest's head underwater until the high priest drowned. And then he had the nerve to claim that the death was an accident. Another time he made up lies about an opponent, and the man was eventually tried and executed because of those lies. Another time, when he had to pay tribute to Caesar, Herod had 45 of his political enemies killed, and he sold off their estates in order to pay his bills. Herod was not a man you'd want to mess with.

Towards the end of his life, Herod became even more paranoid. He had put down numerous plots against him. And he was always on the lookout for new dangers, new threats to his throne, real, or imagined.

And so, one day, these Magi from the East wander into his palace, into the palace of the ruthless King of the Jews. And they say, "Excuse me, where is the baby born to be the new King of the Jews? We've come here to worship him." That's an amazing thing to say: 'Excuse me, Mr. Nasty Vicious King. We've come to worship the new King. Where is he?'

Matthew tells us what Herod's reaction was. Depending on how you translate it, Herod was disturbed, troubled, frightened, worried, or upset. There is no doubt that he saw this new king as a threat.

So he calls together all of the priests and Bible experts to find out where the child would be born. They know their scriptures, so they tell Herod that the prophet Micah prophesied that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem.

And so Herod sends the Magi down to Bethlehem. You can just see the fake smile on his face. You can hear the syrupy tone in his voice. "When you find the baby king, come back and tell me, so that I can pay him a visit and worship him too." But we all know better. Herod's motives are transparent. What he's really saying is, "Tell me where my rival is so that I can eliminate him."

There's a real irony here. A bunch of pagan astrologers have come to Israel to worship the new King of the Jews, the Messiah, the one whose coming has been prophesied in scripture, the one the Jewish people have been waiting for for centuries. These pagans, these foreigners want to worship, but they don't know where Jesus is. On the other hand, the king, and the priests and the scribes know the revelation of scripture. They know the Messiah is supposed

to be born in Bethlehem. They've got the inside track. But they're not willing to worship him. Instead, they want to destroy him.

So the Magi go to Bethlehem and they find the baby Jesus. They find the true king. They bow down and prostrate themselves in front of him. They give him gold, frankincense, and myrrh, which are gifts fit for a king. And they worship the true king of the Jews. Then God warns them in a dream not to see Herod on the return trip. So they go home by another way, which proves that they really are WISE men after all.

When Herod realizes that they've double crossed him, he's furious. He orders his soldiers to kill all the baby and toddler boys in Bethlehem. But Joseph gets Jesus and Mary out of Dodge just in the nick of time, and they high tail it down to Egypt. The final score is God 3, Herod 0. The old and paranoid King in Jerusalem does everything in his power to destroy the helpless baby King. But Jesus survives, despite Herod's worst efforts.

The contrast between Herod and Jesus couldn't be more pronounced. Herod relies upon treachery and the might of the sword. Jesus is powerless, he's just a helpless baby. Herod does everything he can to acquire and retain his power. Jesus, God's only son from the beginning of time, gives up his power, and is born as a human baby. Herod sits in the midst of luxury and wealth and creature comforts. Jesus is born into dirty and humble poverty.

Herod is willing to make other people suffer and die in order to save himself. Jesus is willing to suffer and die himself in order to save other people.

The bottom line is, Herod flexes all of his human muscles, Herod uses all of his human power, and he enjoys temporary domination, but he loses and dies in the end. Jesus dies and is seemingly defeated, but he rises to new life and eternal victory.

The 2nd chapter of Matthew is really a tale of 2 kings: the evil man who thinks he's king, and the little baby who really is king. Now we could make things very easy on ourselves and say, "Look at how terrible and evil Herod is. Look how wonderful and good Jesus is." Both those statements are true. But by putting Jesus in the white hat and Herod in the black hat, we get ourselves off the hook. Instead, the challenge for us is to be always on the lookout for the Herod within us and around us. We need to continually ask, "When are we using the same tactics as Herod?"

The reality is, Herod's tactics are very seductive. That's one thing the Star Wars movies nail dead on. The dark side is seductive. Evil can be very attractive.

The methods of Herod are alive and well in our society. We often idolize those who succeed by ruthlessly squashing all opposition. Think of all the expressions and clichés we use that reflect the dark side: Might makes right. Only the strong survive. Mercy is for the weak. Look out for #1. It's my way or the highway. Nice guys finish last. The new golden rule is, "Those who have the gold make the rules." These are the methods of Herod.

If someone gets in your way, let 'em have it. You don't need to use the sword. A well placed rumor will work. Or digging up a little dirt. Or talking behind people's backs. All

these methods insure that you will temporarily hold on to your power, that you will climb the ladder at the expense of someone else. All of these are the methods of Herod.

Wise men still need to ask, “Where is the baby born to be king?” Is he in our hearts? Is he in the way we live our daily lives? Is he present in the way we treat each other?

Or like Herod, do we seek to destroy him and what he stands for in the way we live our lives, the way we focus on ourselves, the way we ignore the needs of others.

We’ve got the inside track. We have the choice. Destroy him. Or worship him. There can be no divided loyalties. There is only room for one king on the throne of our hearts.

A new king has been born, showing us a new way. A light shines in the darkness. The darkness is unable to extinguish that light. May we have the grace to let that light shine within us and through us as well. Amen.