



One Page Sermon

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December 24, 2024

Love knows your name

Recap of sermon from December 24, 2024

Scripture: Luke 2:1-20

The song tells us it was a Silent Night, and to the shepherds watching their flocks, that would have been a good thing. Sounds in the night are not welcome. Sounds in the night are predators stalking the sheep. Sounds in the night are bandits threatening their livelihood. Sounds in the night are Herod's men, come down from the fortress to placate their violently paranoid puppet king.

There is an element of danger that came on Christmas Eve that most don't recognize, but the readers of Luke's Gospel would have been well aware. Luke was careful to make sure the readers understood this present danger: it was Herod and the Roman regime the propped him up as their king.

Herod the Great is a well-known figure in history. He was "Great" because of his great building projects. He built the city of Caesarea Maritima. He converted the Temple in Jerusalem from a modest building into one of the great wonders of the ancient world. He built palaces in Jerusalem, Masada, and one known as Herodium.

Herodium was 7 miles from Jerusalem and 3 miles from Bethlehem. It was a residence and a fortress. It served as an important strategic site to keep the countryside in order.

Herod was King because his father Antipater was an ally of Julius Caesar, even saved Caesar's life at one point. Antipater was nominally Jewish, and was named the ruler of regions that included Judea and Galilee. His son Herod was named King of the Jews, and given power to raise taxes and armies to keep the people in line with Roman rule.

There were people alive when Jesus died that would have remembered their independence. After centuries of being subjugated by a rotating list of global superpowers—Assyrians, Babylonians, Egyptians, or the rule of Alexander the Great, the Maccabean revolt arose out of the Judean countryside, overthrowing descendants of Alexander the Great that ruled the area at the time.

They restored Jewish customs and worship, returned the menorah to the Temple, and as they rededicated the Temple in 138 BCE, a day's worth of oil lasted a miraculous eight days. The Feast of the Dedication is known to most as Hannukah (this year Christmas Day is the first day of Hannukah as well).



Built around 20 BCE, this is King Herod's fortress that is known as the Herodium, and this is a view from a modern village next to Bethlehem. From the top of the seven-story fortress, one could see both Bethlehem and Jerusalem. Using large signaling mirrors, the Herodium could carry signals from Jerusalem to Masada, another important fortress.

Herod the Great was a powerful ruler, but he was paranoid and violent. He was quick to believe in conspiracies and was known to have killed many of his political rivals, both real and perceived. This list included his favorite wife and two sons, who he believed were conspiring against him.

The shepherds in the field watching their flocks at night were doing so in the shadow of the Herodium. They were doing so in the land that birthed the Maccabean revolt. When messengers appeared suddenly (remember, that is the direct translation of what *angel* means), their fear would have been real. Messengers in the night in the shadow of Herodium would have brought news of arrest, treason, and suppression.

Herod turned out to be right. There was a conspiracy. There was a new King who would lead a new Kingdom. The messengers brought Good News and a message of conspiracy that Herod was not great enough to stop.

It was a conspiracy of love. It was a conspiracy of peace on earth, good will toward all, and salvation from God. It was a conspiracy that was born in a manger and wrapped in cloth. A new revolution started in the Judean countryside, and the shepherds were in on the conspiracy.

We are in on it too. In the shadow of Empire, exploitation, greed, and power, on this night a savior is born. Hear the messengers say, "Peace on earth and good will to all." The conspiracy has started, and love whispers your name to invite you in. Join in the love conspiracy. Break the silence of the night with good news: a Savior is born.