

A Christian Response to Herodism

One of the major art galleries in Munich was designed around one room. That room was designed to house one huge, life-sized painting of the Last Judgment. Another enormous Rubens painting in that same room depicts the event we've just heard from Matthew's gospel. The painting is so graphic that it grabs your attention and chills your spine. I can still remember the look of horror on a mother's face. One Roman soldier holds her by the hair; another kills her baby. A shocking image! Some today would question whether we are able to feel adequate moral outrage at things that demand outrage. TV violence is only one of the desensitizing causes. Do we feel adequate moral outrage at a modern slaughter of the innocents, abortion? In our land 4000 per day -- 1.5 million per year (that's the combined population of North and South Dakota) -- 20 million total since 1973 -- have died by legalized abortion.

Or maybe I should back up to another question: Is there really any connection between Herod's slaughter in Jerusalem and the modern tragedy of abortion? Of course there is. I'm going to take for granted today that you know that. This is a congregation of Christians which believes that God's Word is perfectly reliable and true in all it says. But if you're a visitor today not sure of this conclusion, let me stress that the same Bible which tells you the wonderful news about a Savior also condemns as murder the American practice of abortion. Thus our theme today: Christian Response to Herodism. You won't find the term Herodism in some dictionaries, but it has been used by the church to denounce the killing of the unborn (in their mother's wombs).

One author has put our modern scandal this way: "We have the terrible spectacle of so-called mothers and would-be mothers, begging Herod to come and destroy the life that God has created in them." And fathers and unrelated citizens too. Begging Herod? Yes; insisting that the government, Herod, give them the right to destroy human life.

Another Biblical parallel to this tragedy is Molech worship. You heard God's condemnation of this in today's Old Testament lesson. I hesitate to give detail of this practice because of sensitive stomachs. Suffice it to say, in addition to the comment in the service folder, that the helpless child was seared or burned to death -- its shrieks and cries only enticing greater hysteria in the frenzied, orgiastic ritual.

What is difficult to comprehend is how the Israelites, who had seen so many wondrous acts and mercies from God, could fall to such perverse idolatry. But they did, some dying as lapsed pagans and ending up in eternal damnation. It's interesting to wonder about those who came to their senses, repented of their sins, and came back to a covenant relationship with the true God. Think of the horrible aftermath of their guilt. Listen to ancient King David give expression to his feeling of guilt over murder and adultery, Psalm 38. "O Lord, your arrows have pierced me ... My bones have no soundness because of my sin. My guilt has overwhelmed me like a burden too heavy to bear. My wounds fester and are loathsome because of my sinful folly. I am bowed down and brought very low; all day long I go about mourning ... I am feeble and utterly crushed; I groan in anguish of heart."

Bethlehem's parents weren't responsible for their grief; they were just in the wrong place at the wrong time. Parents who fell to Molech worship were responsible for their grief and guilt. "I'm thinking now of those who later returned to God. So in a sense the babies weren't the only victims. The parents were too. The parallel I suggest to you today is something called Post-Abortion Syndrome. PAS is a delayed reaction of guilt, depression, even suicidal feelings. Some research indicates that the reaction time of Post-Abortion Syndrome may be delayed by as much as 10 years.

Many people who say they have no regrets speak prematurely. With her name changed to "Amy," one interviewed woman says, "For the first six years after my abortion, I could have taken a pro-choice sign

and marched with it." Then she admitted what abortion really is. Her comment now: "I know my life will go on, but I will never be able to forget that I selfishly murdered my child."

Jeremiah 31:15-17, quoted in Matthew chapter two, mentions the spiritual reality of abortion's aftermath. Rachel weeps for her children, who are no more, and the Lord comforts her; her cries have been heard and there is hope for the future. It's interesting that the Catholic church has started a ministry called Project Rachel. Vicki Thorn, who founded Project Rachel in Milwaukee in 1984, comments that post-abortion guilt is unrelated to religious belief. Agnostics and the unchurched also experience this guilt. And this doesn't surprise us at all. Many who once endorsed abortion are now finally being confronted by the real horror of abortion -- dead babies and grieving families.

Why do I mention all this today? Because I want us, on the basis of God's Word and will, to think of a different abortion angle on this anniversary of the Roe v. Wade Supreme Court decision (1/22/73). Usually sermons on this occasion stress our responsibility to get the law changed, to influence those who are making a decision about their pregnancy, to support pro-life activity financially and by volunteering in other ways. All these emphases are important, but today we stress a different Christian responsibility -- sharing love and forgiveness with those who made a wrong decision and now regret, repent, know they'd never do it again. A recent article in "National Right to Life News" states: "As we would expect, it has been the pro-life community that has led the way in reaching out to women whose lives have been devastated by abortion. It says something wonderful about pro-lifers that they so willingly extend the hand of reconciliation to those very persons whose actions can be so distressing to those who work so hard to save life."

You people are on the front lines. The general public won't come to a pastor before or after a decision about abortion. Most won't visit a pregnancy counseling center. But you might know of someone struggling with a decision or with guilt; he or she might confide in you at work, school or in your living room.

What then is the main message of our congregation -- and you as a Christian -- for those suffering from guilt over abortion? Sin. Murder. Or ignore that person and fight for change. One of these can be our main message regarding abortion. What is it then? It's the same message that we apply to greed, adultery, materialism, dishonesty, and so many other sins that affect each of us. That main message is forgiveness. Real forgiveness -- God's forgiveness -- and real repentance are incredibly life-changing factors. You know the hymn "Amazing Grace;" it was written by a former slave trader.

The Reformation made a vital correction in the common medieval view of God. Most saw God (the Father and the Son) as a terrible vengeful judge only pointing the accusing finger. I wonder how many unchurched quasi-believers and actual unbelievers see the church in that same way -- only pointing the accusing finger, rather than also holding out the hand of Christ's forgiveness and power to change.

What if Herod had repented and come to believe the gospel and worship the Christ he wanted dead? Forgiveness for Herod? Yes, Jesus' death has already forgiven that sin and all others. God's love is that big. So the Christian response to this hypothetical Herod would be to help him see his Savior.

Remember Jesus' words to the woman guilty of adultery: "Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more." To be sure, all without true repentance and faith will be condemned. And no one will benefit from Christ's forgiveness who sees it only as the hypocrite's eternal life insurance policy. But when people feel their guilt, they feel their sin. They are crying out for healing, and most don't know where or how to find it. Will you help them? They will be grateful now, and (in some cases) for eternity. In 2 Corinthians 5:20 Paul described your Christian ministry this way: "We are therefore God's ambassadors,

as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

The discovery of forgiveness is also necessary for others implicated in modern Herodism: those who advised abortion (parents, boyfriend, other friends, doctor - even, tragically, some confused ministers). The guilt may extend to the "might-have-been" grandparents who urged abortion. They now walk through the department store, notice the baby clothes, and painfully regret their error. They discovered the truth about abortion 20 years after they gave their fateful advice. One Christian psychiatrist tells of a patient he has seen over a period of years. The underlying cause of depression seems to be grief over a son that man will never see.

I also chose today's emphasis for this reason: Gone are the days when a pastor could speak of the terrible thing that some people "out there in the world" have done. Some new and some horribly confused Christians have abortion in their pasts. A member of one of our churches in El Paso once left before the service even began -- in tears and great distress. Why? Because the back page of the new Northwestern Lutheran (7-84) featured the imaginary diary of a pre-born little girl. Here are some entries. "October 2: Today my life began. October 23: My mouth is just now beginning to open. Just think -- in a year or so I'll be laughing ... My first word will be 'mama.' December 13: My eyes are almost fully developed ... More than anything I want to see my mother. How do you look, Mother? December 26: Today my mother killed me." That El Paso woman was sorry for her decision of years ago. She believed in God's forgiveness, but with a weak faith she was still struggling with her guilt.

If there is someone here today with any secret grief, even from Post-Abortion Syndrome, trust God's forgiveness and healing. Know that it will enable you to forgive yourself because God forgives you. Listen to the Messiah speaking prophetically in Isaiah 61: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because the Lord (Yahweh) has anointed me to preach good news to the poor (not financially, but spiritually). He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted ... to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion -- to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair."

We have all experienced Jesus' love and forgiveness and power for new life. Because it means so much to you and out of thanks to God, pass it on to anyone suffering from confusion, guilt or despair. Amen.

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