

Isaiah 35:1-10 “Herod’s Threat”

Last week we compared the similarities between the Old Testament story of Sarah’s pregnancy and how she gave birth to her son Isaac at age 99 and the New Testament story of Elizabeth’s later-in-life-than-average pregnancy and birth. The lesson for both? Don’t give up hope. Dare to believe that the impossible is possible.

So this week, I want to do another Old Testament/New Testament comparison. This time I want to take you back to the 1490s ... and I’m not talking in the Common Era like, “Columbus sailed in 1492,” I’m talking about 1,490 years before Jesus was even born. Egypt was the reigning superpower of the Middle East. During this time, there was an increasing number of Hebrews living in Egypt. These were the descendants of Joseph who settled the land of Goshen in Egypt after Joseph helped Egypt get through a devastating famine. Well a new Pharaoh came to power in Egypt who conveniently forgot all about the good things Joseph did. All he saw was an increasing number of Hebrews in his kingdom and it scared him. He was thinking, “There’s getting to be more of them than there are of us, so we need to do something or they’re going to take over. Hmmm. I know! I can build a wall! No, that won’t work because they’re all here. Can’t deport them because there are too many of them. I know! Let’s make them slaves!” So he used the Hebrew people as slave labor to build cities and temples. The problem was, even under oppression, the Hebrews kept growing in numbers. Pretty soon there was a fair amount of “Hebrewphobia” among the general population in Egypt which made the children of Israel’s lives even harder. So the Pharaoh came up with a really weird idea. He told the Egyptian midwives to kill any boy that was born to a Hebrew woman. But the midwives refused. They told Pharaoh that the Hebrew women were so tough that they didn’t even need midwives. So Pharaoh commanded *all* Egyptians to drown any boy that was born to a Hebrew in the Nile River. That’s when we learn about how this baby born to a Hebrew woman was hidden in a basket and sent down the Nile River until he was found and given to Pharaoh’s daughter to raise as a

“Prince of Egypt.” The baby’s name? Moses. And that got the ball rolling for one of the most important stories in the Old Testament ... Moses saving the Hebrew people by leading them on an exodus out of Egypt into the Promised Land where they eventually settled and became the nation of Israel.

Fast forward to the first century in the Common Era. The Nation of Israel is still in the Promise Land, but now they’re under the rule of the Roman Empire. The Romans had an *interesting* way of governing. When you get right down to it, the Romans ruled without any mercy whatsoever. But ... the Romans wanted their subjects to *think* they were full of fairness and grace. So they’d set up indigenous “kings” in each of their provinces. In Israel’s case, the King was Herod the Great. Herod was also known as “Herod the Builder.” His biggest achievement was the re-building of the Jerusalem temple. And it was *awesome*. It rivaled the original temple that King Solomon built. Which, *you would think*, would make Herod the Great sort of a hero among the people. The problem was that King Herod was a jerk. First of all, he was in Rome’s back pocket. He’s often referred to as the “puppet king” because it was Rome pulling his strings. Secondly, he was *brutal* ruler. He was quick to eliminate anyone who posed a threat to him ... even his own family. So even though the idea behind setting this guy up as “King of the Jews” was to appease the general population, what ended up happening is that the Jews hated both the Romans *and* Herod. That meant that the Jews were still putting their desires, dreams, and hopes in a Messiah who would come in and save the people of Israel from these corrupt leaders and usher in a new Kingdom that would be like “the old days” when King David ruled.

Herod the Great wasn’t clueless. He knew the people weren’t happy, and he knew that they were praying for a Messiah to come and rescue them from their current situation. So one day, some “magi,” probably Zoroastrian astrologers, came to Jerusalem asking about the child born in Bethlehem who was prophesied to be the King of the Jews. The last thing Herod wanted was someone challenging him for the title “King,”

because at that point, the people of Israel would have favored a chimpanzee over him on the throne. So Herod said, “Wellll ... how about you guys go find him, and let me know where he is so I can go ... worship him. Yeah, that’s it. Worship him!” So the magi found Jesus in Bethlehem, but they saw right through Herod and decided to not report back to him. Herod was furious. So he sent his men to Bethlehem to kill every child under the age of two, but by then Joseph and Mary had fled to Egypt to protect Jesus.

See the similarities? You’ve got two very powerful, yet very insecure rulers who are willing to kill children so that they can stay in power. Here’s the sad thing though. Even though he was a puppet of the Roman Empire, Herod was still a Jew. He was a descendant of the people who were enslaved in Egypt under Pharaoh, and yet he was doing the same brutal, horrible, unspeakable things to his own people that Pharaoh did over 1400 years earlier. The descendant of the Hebrew slaves was acting like a slave master himself. Herod was supposed to protect his people. He was supposed to preserve their dignity as God’s people. Herod was supposed to be one of the good guys! But because he had been given enough power and provocation, he behaved in the same way as Pharaoh ... one of the Jewish people’s most notorious bad guys. Which leads us to the question: How are we any different than Herod? When we’re given power and we feel that we’re being provoked, would we behave any differently than him? This whole story lays out an even more important question: “How do we *manage* power, and how do we deal with violence?”

Herod and Pharaoh show us that violence is a tool to either gain or maintain power. Yet the baby who Herod wanted to kill modeled another way. His tool is service, not violence. His goal isn’t to gain or maintain power, his goal is to empower others. His vision is reflected more in the innocence and vulnerability of children than in the violence of men. So let’s take this a step further and think about how this applies today. The next war, whoever wages it, will resemble every other war in the past. It will be planned and started by powerful, older men in their

comfortable offices and it will be fought by people who are the age of their children and grandchildren. Most of the casualties will be somewhere around the age of 18 – 22 years old. Legally adults, but still “kids” by today’s standards. A large number of them will be poor, probably from communities where the only opportunity they have to get out of their cycle of poverty is to go into the military, which is okay ... that’s a good option for a lot of kids. It’s good vocational training and provides great opportunities in life. But that doesn’t change the fact that they’re still obligated to follow the orders of these old men who start wars. And thus history repeats itself. The story of Herod and the slaughter of children will be played out again. And again the tears of mothers will fall.

The sacrifice of children for the well-being and security of adults has a long history. There was an ancient religion in the Middle East that dedicated themselves to an idol named Molech. Every year, the followers of Molech would sacrifice infants to this idol. They figured that by doing so, they’d appease Molech’s wrath thereby earning his favor. The beautiful thing about the Bible ... the beautiful thing about the story and religion of Israel is how God turns all these sick and twisted practices completely around. Earlier this year I was talking about how the Bible turned the meaning of a rainbow around. In the Babylonian religion, if you saw a rainbow in the sky it was supposed to remind you of the god Marduk’s bow and how it could eradicate the enemies of Babylon in the same way that Marduk killed Tiamat. So when you see a rainbow in the sky, remember that if you rebel against Babylon, you will be wiped off the face of the earth. But in the Bible, the rainbow is a sign of God’s covenant to *never* destroy the earth. The same is true when it comes to child sacrifice. God doesn’t require appeasement like Molech does. You don’t need to sacrifice children to win favor with God. In fact, God embodies true, loving, mature parenthood. Parenthood that’s self-giving for the sake of one’s children. It is *not* about sacrificing children for your own selfish interests.

It's good for us to wrestle with what we believe about God when we're faced with challenging circumstance. We have to ask, "Does God promote or demand violence? Does God favor the sacrifice of children for the well-being of adults? Is God best reflected in the image of a powerful old man who sends the young and vulnerable to die on their behalf? Or ... Is God best seen in the image of a helpless baby in a manger ... one who identifies with the marginalized ... one who shares their vulnerability?"

We don't live in an ideal world. No doubt there. To be alive in the adventure of Jesus is to face some tough and sometimes uncomfortable moments when we have to ask, "How am I going to respond? With violence? With seeing others as disposable? Necessary collateral in the fight to maintain power? Or ... by *withholding* our consent with the powerful *in order to invest in the vulnerable*? Do we side with the Herods of the world and their ruthless regimes, or do we reserve our loyalty for a better king and a better kingdom?"

Why do we need this horrible story about Herod and the ugliness of his actions in the Christmas story anyway? Can't we just skip this? No, we need this story in order to wrestle with these tough questions.