



MEMORIAL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
White Plains, New York 10605

Lay Speakers' Sermons

Joyce Sohl

(Filling in for vacationing Pastor Joe Agne)

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THE ROLES LEFT OUT OF CHRISTMAS

Texts: Matthew 2:13-23, Luke 2:22-38

All remember the Christmas story as told by our children and youth on Dec. 16 and the story as it was retold several other times since. Many of us have it memorized, at least in part. The roles included are usually Mary, Joseph, Jesus, angels, shepherds, and wise men. Sometimes the inn keeper may be thrown in as a symbol of “unwelcoming” to strangers. But there are others that we never mention in the story: three of these we want to think about today.

Herod: Herod the Great was appointed by the Romans to be “King of the Jews”. This Herod is not the same one that was the ruler when John the Baptist or Jesus were killed, but is the father of that Herod, Herod Antipas. Herod the Great was from a long line of ruthless rulers and soldiers. He was totally loyal to Rome and managed to keep up with all the political intrigues of the Roman empire. He rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem, built the city of Caesarea, as well as many fortresses/prisons throughout his kingdom which included Galilee, Samaria, and Judea.

It was this man that the wise men went to see when they saw the Star. And it was this man that they stayed away from when they returned home. Herod felt he had been tricked by the wise men – and that made him very angry. And it was because of this man that Joseph, Mary, and Jesus became refugees fleeing in the middle of the night heading for Egypt.

The story in Matthew is similar to the story of the birth and hiding of Moses when Pharaoh was killing all the Hebrew male children. Herod is also killing all male children under 2 years of age because he is afraid of losing his throne, power, and position. Matthew sees Herod to be like Pharaoh - both men are tyrants, slayers of the innocents, and extreme oppressors - but neither can control God’s plan of salvation of his people.

It’s easy not to include Herod in the Christmas story, but he is still part of the story – the ugly, hateful, and hurtful part of the story. And the scary part is that there are still Herods in our world – those who abuse and kill children; those who deny people their basic necessities of living; those who enslave children, teens and adults; those who cause people to become refugees from war, poverty, and hatred; those who are more concerned about themselves than others; those whose lives are built on greed, position, and power. Yes, the Herods of the world are still alive and well – but God is still in charge and the dreams of God’s people, when we choose to follow them, can help to bring about God’s reign of justice and peace.

Simeon: In sharp contrast to Herod is the old man Simeon as found in the Gospel of Luke. Simeon was in the temple when Joseph and Mary went to Jerusalem around Jesus' 40th day. They went because the Jewish law declared that at the birth of the firstborn male in any family the child would be designated as holy and certain sacrifices should be made in the temple. Being good Jews, Mary, Joseph and Jesus went to the temple and there they were met by Simeon.

Simeon is an old man, very devout, a believer that had waited and anticipated the coming of the Messiah. Luke says that "the Holy Spirit rested on" Simeon and was his guide and counselor. Simeon recognized Jesus as the Messiah and sang a song of praise as he cradled Jesus in his arms:

This hymn in the King James Version is:

Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word;
For mine eyes have seen thy salvation, which thou hast prepared before the face of all people,
A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel.

This hymn echoes passages from Genesis and Isaiah and proclaims that God's promise of salvation has come. God salvation is about rescue, deliverance, liberation, healing, and wholeness and Simeon is truly thankful and blessed to have seen God's fulfillment.

Imagine if you will, the astonishment of Mary and Joseph at what Simeon was saying about their son. Even though both had been visited by angels and knew there was something very special about this child, they were still amazed. Then Mary's amazement turns to fear as Simeon warns them of the life of pain, contradictions, and rejection that will be Jesus'. He also says that Mary will also endure pain as "a sword will pierce your own soul too."

Charles Wesley's hymn that the choir sang this morning is Simeon's song. At the evening prayers in many Anglican and Catholic churches Simeon's hymn is sung. There are many Simeons in the world today proclaiming Jesus as light to all nations and all people. His song is our song – a song that is sung in many languages with many different rhythms- and yet a song that tells us that Jesus is a "gift to humankind."

I think Simeon would be a good addition to our retelling of the Christmas story. His song is what the message of Jesus is all about – inclusiveness, welcome, wholeness and healing, and the reign of God that brings light to a dark and troubled world.

Anna: In the temple at the same time was the prophetess, Anna. Now Anna was a very old woman, probably well into her 90's. She was a fixture in the community, a holy woman who the people turned to for help, advice, and guidance. She prayed for the sick, the new born, and the problems facing her community. Anna was a widow, a woman who worshipped God daily, a woman who did not let her age destroy her hope. She sees Jesus as Simeon is praying, and knows immediately that he is the Messiah, the expected one. She also then breaks into a song of praise.

But she doesn't stop with just a song of praise. She spreads the news throughout the community – "God's bearer of salvation and redemption has come. He is here and a part of our community." Some say that Anna brought to Jesus her gift of witness – for she witnessed to what God had done in her midst. She made sure that all knew about Jesus and in so doing she was part of the small, but welcoming community around the temple area.

I can imagine Anna calling all of the children and telling them to spread the news. I can imagine her at the next meeting of the Temple Women sharing her news about the child. I can imagine her sleeping that eve-

ning with a smile on her face and a prayer within her heart for Jesus, his parents, and the community.

There are many Annas in the world today. They may be old or young, but they witness to the good news of Jesus Christ. They speak of peace and justice; they are in protests; they help the neighbor and the stranger; they are the solid foundation of many communities; they are the givers of wisdom and insight into God's work in our world. I think Anna should become part of our retelling of the Christmas story, for she started the process of telling the story in the community. (Remember the shepherds talked about only among themselves, the angels sang only to particular people, and the wise men went home)

Yes, these three are part of the Christmas Story. Keep Herod in the background, but he must be in the story to remind us of the evil in the world and to prod us again to stand firm against injustice and oppression. Simeon and Anna can come to the forefront of the story as reminders of our need to be faithful, obedient, sharers of wisdom, and proclaimers of God's message. And isn't it interesting that each of these three knew God was in their midst: Herod reacted with anger and revenge, Simeon counseled the parents and praised God, and Anna told the community what she had heard and seen

May we make these three part of our story during this Christmastide as we recommit ourselves to pursuing and living the gospel of love and justice. Amen.