

THE FOURTH KING

I hope each of you had a joyous Christmas. Perhaps, though, you have moved from the anticipation of Christmas to the anxiety after Christmas. Particularly if you gained weight during this season of celebration or spent more than you planned. Julia Boynton Green spoke for many people when she wrote:

'Twas the night after Christmas and all through the house, we were paying each one for our yuletide carouse. I felt in my tummy a burden like lead, and visions of fatness careened through my head. Martha tumbled and tossed, at last breathed with a sob, I've got appendicitis, I'm sure of it Bob. I swore about sunrise, it's not worth the price. Believe me, next Christmas, we dine on boiled rice.

Some of us can also relate to the tired mother of six wonderful but active children. After being home with them and her husband from dawn to midnight during the Christmas vacation, heard the song on the radio, "I wish it could be Christmas all year long." She jumped out of her chair despite being tired and worn down and shouted, "Forget it, only a merchant would want it to be Christmas all year long."

Maybe you can relate to that. Of course, people who use credit cards find that Christmas does last all year long. This is all to say that in spite of the joy we all experience during the celebration of Christ's birth, there is a downside to Christmas. A few years ago, newspaper columnist Mike Royko shared the other side of the Christmas story in one of his columns. He told about a stranger who put \$1,600 in gold coins in a Salvation Army kettle. The person placed the gift there quietly and anonymously. This is exactly the kind of story the print media is looking for to demonstrate the spirit of caring that Christmas brings out. Unfortunately there is a follow up story. The local Salvation Army office began getting calls about the gold coins. The coins were stolen. A thief had dropped them in the kettle to get rid of them.

Royko then told another story about a man driving home from work on Christmas Eve who saw a young boy fall through the ice in a nearby lake. The man stopped his car, jumped out, tore off his jacket and crawled out onto the ice. He managed somehow to save the drowning boy. Happy ending, wouldn't you say? Unfortunately the man discovered that while he was risking his life saving the boy, a person in a crowd of onlookers stole his jacket and the envelope containing his Christmas bonus.

There is a downside to the Christmas story, a downside generated by human sinfulness. That downside is personified in the story of the fourth king in the Christmas narrative. We all know about the three kings from the east. Wise men they are some-times called. Our hearts are warmed as we see these three men of stature kneel before the newborn babe and offer their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. A happy ending to the story for sure, if it weren't for the fourth king. That fourth king, of course, is King Herod. "Go and search

diligently for the child,” Herod said to the wise men. “And when you have found him, come and bring me word, that I may worship him, too.”

What a sham! What hypocrisy! Herod had no intention of worshiping the newborn king. He intended to do him harm. And thus, warned by an angel, Mary and Joseph are forced to flee in the night while the wise men, being warned in a dream, return home by another route. When Herod discovered that the wise men had disregarded his instructions to inform him of the Christ’s whereabouts, he flew into a fit of rage and had his soldiers slay all of the boys less than two years of age in Bethlehem and the region thereabout. What a tragic intrusion into this beautiful story of Christ’s birth. All brought about by this fourth king whose name shall forever live in infamy, Herod.

History books call him, strangely enough, Herod the Great. Herod came from a powerful family. His father and grandfather were both public administrators who had widened their base of authority. Thus in the year 37 BC Herod the Great was made king of Judea by the Romans. An imperious king, Herod founded the city of Caesarea and rebuilt much of Jerusalem, including the temple. He was a capable leader, but he was notoriously cruel. He executed three of his sons as well as his second wife. Cruelty became a family tradition. It was Herod Antipas who had John the Baptist beheaded. So we should not be surprised at Herod the Great’s violent reaction when he learned that these three wise men had disobeyed him. When they did not return, Herod was so angry that he initiated what has become known in Christian tradition as “The slaughter of the innocents.” Herod was an unusually vindictive man, but he made the same mistakes that many people make.

FIRST OF ALL, HEROD REFUSED TO SUBMIT HIS LIFE TO A HIGHER AUTHORITY. Herod was a tyrant. He had no regard for either God or humanity. He was a Jew but by the end of his reign the Jews hated and despised him, even though on a material level, his rule had been quite favorable to them. His rule ended as the rule of all cruel despots end with the alienation not only from his enemies but from his family and friends as well as the people he ruled. Herod knew that when he died, nobody would shed a tear. So he had made special arrangements to guarantee that someone would grieve at his passing. According to Barclay, Herod left orders that when he died his soldiers were to round up a group of well known citizens, frame them for some concocted crime, and then kill them. That way, Herod assured himself that SOMEBODY would shed tears after his death, even if the tears weren’t for him. How sad and how tragic. But Herod was his own god. His world revolved around his own selfish concerns.

KING HEROD WAS A MAN OF GREED AS WELL. His world revolved around his own selfish desires and his greed resulted in his descent to the depths of human cruelty. That’s not unusual when you refuse to submit your life to a higher authority. We run into less powerful King Herods all the time. There are people who are tyrants in their own homes. There are people who are tyrants in the work place, who run their offices through fear and intimidation. At times, there are even tyrants in the church. We run into tyrants in

every area of life. When our lives are centered in our own passions, when we refuse to surrender our lives to a higher authority, when we are ego-centered and not God-centered, we tend to spoil every relationship.

A certain husband was having difficulty dealing with his wife. He decided to get a divorce and sought out a lawyer for professional advice. After telling his lawyer his side of the case the man asked, "What's the best thing I can do?" The attorney replied, "The best thing you can do is to move back in with your wife, apologize for all the harm you have done, and then work harder than ever before to make your marriage work." After a long deadly silence, the man inquired, "What's the next best thing I can do?"

Herod rejected the best for his life and for the kingdom in which he reigned. He settled for a twisted, distorted life because he lived in his own little world. He was his own god. He would not submit his life to a higher authority. You see, Herod the Great did not have to go down into history as a monster who slaughtered innocent children. There was hope for a better life even for Herod. If only he had looked up and seen the star of Jesus.

Jacob Needleman was an observer at the launch of Apollo 17 in 1975. It was a night launch, and there were hundreds of cynical reporters all over the lawn, drinking beer, wisecracking, and waiting for this 35-story-high rocket. The countdown came, and then the launch. The first thing you see, according to Needleman, is this extraordinary orange light, which is just at the limit of what you can bear to look at. Everything is illuminated with this light. Then comes this thing slowly rising up in total silence, because it takes a few seconds for the sound to come across. You hear a WHOOOOOSH! It enters right into you. You can practically hear jaws dropping. The sense of wonder fills everyone in the whole place as this thing goes up and up. The first stage ignites this beautiful blue flame. It becomes like a star, but you realize there are humans on it. And then there's total silence. People just get up quietly, helping each other up. They look at one another, speaking quietly and interestedly. These were suddenly moral people because of the sense of wonder and awe.

If only Herod had caught that sense of awe and wonder. If only he had looked up. He might have seen the Bethlehem star and recognized that it was his hope as well as the worlds. If only Herod had surrendered himself to the God of the stars and the God of the child in Bethlehem's stable, what a different story we might have to tell. Herod the Great might have lived up to his name. His own people as well as the world in general might have called his name blessed.

But you know Herod's story is our story. There are some of us who are not doing too well with our relationships either. Our lives also are fragmented and broken. As a result, the spiritual side of our lives is suffering. As we come to the end of this year and as we prepare ourselves for a new year, we too, need to look up. Bethlehem's star shines for us also.