

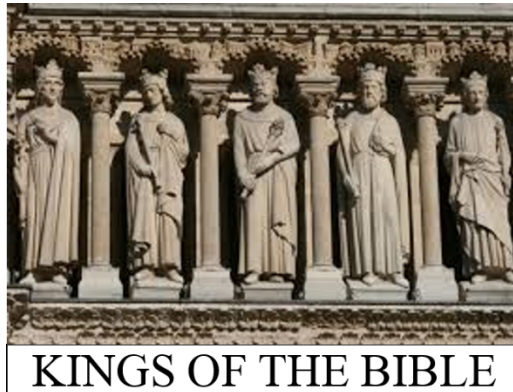
Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Sunday, May 17, 2020

“King Herod’s Infrastructural Legacy”

**Fifth of six in a sermon series entitled “Kings of the Bible”
Sixth Sunday of Easter**

The Reverend Dr. Scott Everett Couper

Christian Scripture: John 2:12-22



[Welcome to the fifth of six sermons that focus on the historical biographies of biblical ‘kings’. In this series entitled “Kings of the Bible”, we will move from one end of the Bible to the other mining spiritual lessons learned from scriptural rulers. My aim is to apply these lessons to our own lives and to those who we choose to be our leaders. This week, we continue with King Herod and learn about the infrastructural legacy his chequered reign bequeathed to humanity.]

Before we hear this morning’s message, I’d like to first encourage all of you listening to invite friends, neighbours, colleagues, and even people you just met at the grocery store to our on-line service next week. To assist you, I am

going to tell you three jokes, one of which you can choose to re-tell to someone you invite to worship. Keep in mind that when you re-tell your chosen joke, it is important that you generously guffaw and slap your knee while mentioning that Centre Church's minister tells the funniest jokes in his sermons.

Here are the three jokes from which you can choose:

1. Did you hear that the Building & Grounds Board is changing the flooring in the Brattleboro Centre for Children? Yes, they are calling it 'infant-tile'!
2. What is the only structure in Brattleboro that is taller than Centre Church? The library, of course! Why, it has the most stories!
3. Last but not least: Did you hear the joke about how Centre Church is going to raise money to replace its roof? Never mind, it is over your head!

So, pick your favorite joke, remember it, and use it to invite someone to worship next week.

Friends, recall last year I preached about King Herod as it related to the less than cheerful incident called 'the Massacre of the Innocents' (approximately 2 BCE).



During this event chronicled in the scriptures (Matthew 2:16-18), King Herod allegedly ordered the dragnet killing of all two year-old boys in an effort to eliminate Jesus as a potential rival king. Though not necessarily a historical event, the Massacre of the Innocents is indicative of King Herod's oppressive rule. Rulers during this time were almost universally oppressive, so Herod was not necessarily unique. But sometimes, even tyrants were loved by their people. Not Herod. Herod was almost universally despised and his death was not mourned by 'his' people.



There are three the reasons why King Herod's death was almost celebrated: 1. His pedigree was not actually Jewish; 2. He was a stooge of the Roman Empire; 3. He imposed heavy taxes on the people to finance his infrastructural projects.

Although Herod was King of the Jews, he was considered by those he ruled as an ethnic and religious imposter. [After the empire of Alexander the Great broke-up (336-323 BCE), Syrian Seleucid kings ruled the Holy Land (200 BCE). The Maccabean revolt in 164 BCE (from which we hear about the celebration of Hanukkah) ushered in the more religiously faithful reign of the Hasmonaean kings.]

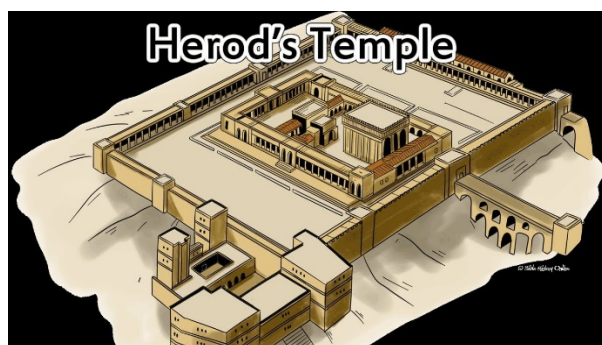


In 125 BCE, a Hasmonaean king forced the southern people of Idumaea to convert to Judaism, including its noble families. Herod was a descendant of these early conversions and, with the support of the Romans, he forcibly seized the throne in 37 BCE. In short, as viewed by his people, Herod was a Jew in name only – he was an interloper claiming to be what he was not. Political opportunism led Herod to identify himself as a faithful Jew. Then and now, politicians often falsely claim to be what they are not so as to garner legitimacy for a constituency they need.

The Romans (enemies, occupiers, and oppressors of the Jews) ushered in and fostered King Herod's rule. During his 33-year reign, Herod initiated a huge

infrastructural program, building cities and temples dedicated to Roman gods and emperors. Herod built theatres for gladiatorial games that often included wild animals. All of these building programs and Roman spectacles were very offensive to pious Jews.

Third, and finally, in order to finance Herod's many infrastructural projects, he had to tax – and he did heavily. Herod taxed the northern region of Galilee in particular, where Jesus and the disciples lived. The heavy taxation is what likely caused so much hatred against tax collectors during Jesus' time – so much so that most people considered the tax collectors traitors and apostates (Luke 19:1-10).



This morning, I would like to conclude by focusing on King Herod's positive contribution – his lasting legacy, the extension of the Second Temple (originally built during Ezra and Nehemiah's time). Herod built one of the largest sites of worship in the Roman world. During Jesus' time (30 CE) it was still under construction. Indeed, our scripture reading this morning highlights

the impressiveness of the structure Herod built. It was viewed at the time as indestructible. Yet, the Romans destroyed it in 70 CE.



There is only one piece of the ancient temple that remains today, the Western Wall, A.K.A. ‘the Wailing Wall’ by Jews and ‘the Buraq Wall’ by Muslims. The ruin is called ‘the Wailing Wall’ because it became Jewish practice to mourn and lament the destruction of the Temple and the national pride it symbolized. It is considered the most sacred and holy place on earth by many – certainly among Jews. Jews and Christians from around the world come to the Wailing Wall to pray. I have never been to this sacred and holy site (perhaps some of you listening have), but I dream of visiting there some day. I understand folks write a prayer on a small slip of paper and insert it into the wall. If I were there today, I would pray for the 89,000 people in the United States and many others around the world who have died thus far from the COVID-19 virus and also for their families who have been devastated by loss.



Today, we learned that though King Herod was a real jerk, he did leave behind a legacy. That legacy is the remnants of a temple, a wall, that has become one of the most holy and sacred places on the planet. In our scripture reading, Jesus said the temple would be destroyed, and it was. But, he was actually referring to himself. He told his disciples that he would be re-built (resurrected). And he was! Christianity understands that the Body of Christ is us, the Church. And though we the people are the Body of Christ, that body is symbolized by our church building, our sanctuary, our steeple.



Similar to King Herod, we have the opportunity to leave behind us a legacy that will last decades, if not centuries. Buildings & Grounds has informed Council that our church may need to invest \$325,000 - \$350,000 in the near future to *repair and replace* our church roof so that for the next one-hundred and fifty years our descendants will have a sacred and holy place at which to worship. Our church leadership will launch a capital campaign that will raise the funds for our church roof. I will invest in this capital campaign, over and above my normal tithe, and I pray that many of you who are able will also commit to contributing.

While Herod was an oppressive king, he left behind a beautiful and holy structure that generations have flocked to in order to encounter the sacred. Now, is our turn to do the same!



With our roof capital campaign, let us build so that our descendants can also encounter the sacred.

This is the Word of God, and it was delivered to the people of God, and the people of God responded, “Amen”.