

# *The Sunnybrook Pulpit*

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## **Herod, Now and Then**

*Herod, of course, was furious. He ordered that all boys who lived in or near Bethlehem and were two years of age and younger be killed. Matthew 2:1-18*

“Everyone wants to be settled,” to have a place to call home, according to Ralph Waldo Emerson, “but only to the extent that they are willing to be unsettled is there any hope for them.” If we are unwilling to be unsettled, we are unwilling to open ourselves to new truth, to new ways of seeing the world, to the possibility that we may be doing wrong.

As we consider the story of the magi and of Herod it is worth thinking about that, because the Magi were not only willing to be unsettled, to go on a long journey in search of a new king, but once on that journey, they had to continually revise their expectations and their plans. And so they are remembered as being wise. Herod on the other hand, was so unwilling to be unsettled, that he ruthlessly resisted any change, and as a result he is remembered as one of history’s most murderous tyrants.

The magi started out looking for their new king in the place you would expect a new king to be born, in the palace of an old king, in the capital city of Jerusalem. But when they show up, asking about the new king of the Jews, their question causes a bit of consternation, because there is no new king, just a manipulative old king, who doesn’t like the idea of someone replacing him.

What they haven’t yet grasped is that the new king of the Jews will be not just a new king, but a new kind of king, a king who will rule through the power of love rather than force and fear. This new kind of king does not live on a palace on top of a hill, but among his people in the trailer parks and slums. This new kind of king does not command, but invites, does not compel but persuades, does not dominate but serves. This new kind of king does not have secret police to suppress dissent and put down rebellion, because he does not accumulate power, but shares it freely. This new kind of king is willing to be unsettled, because real power is not about getting power, but about empowering others.

The old kind of king is still very common today. Even if they don’t describe themselves as kings, modern Herods rule in Syria, in Russia, in North Korea and in many other places where tyrants impose their brutal will over nations. In his Christmas message a couple of years ago, Pope Francis mentioned children in these and other places who have suffered at the hands of tyranny. “over their blood today stands the shadow of the modern-day Herods.”

In political life, democracy is the great enemy of tyranny, because democracy gives political form, however imperfectly, to the new kind of kingship Jesus embodies. That doesn’t mean that democracy is perfect. Far from it. As Winston Churchill famously said, “democracy is the worst form of government, except for every other form that has been tried.”

Democracy is messy, because it takes power out of the hands of the few and spreads it widely. As a result, democracy is unpredictable. So, people with power find it uncomfortable and inconvenient. Democracy requires leaders to be open to being unsettled, regularly. So, democracy is fragile. It is fragile because it is messy, and because powerful people find it hard to control. So, tyranny is an ever-present temptation for those in power.

But it is not just in other countries where tyranny rears its ugly head: Domestic violence is a more intimate form of tyranny, in which one person uses violence in an attempt to control other members of his own family. And in the past year, there have been a number of celebrities and powerful people who have been exposed for their tyranny in the form of sexual harassment and sexual assault.

But it is not just through violence that tyranny exerts control. Tyranny is pretty common. Perhaps you know a tyrant. Perhaps you live with one. Perhaps you work for one. Perhaps you are one! Non-violent forms of tyranny exist wherever those in power use their power to limit discussion, suppress information, impose their own desires without regard for the needs or feelings of others, command rather than consult, or otherwise use power for their own benefit. Tyranny can be found in families, in churches, in volunteer organizations, in workplaces, or anywhere where people gather.

And Tyrants need not be human. A recent study of mental health issues in adolescents showed that “Adolescents who spent more time on new media (including social media and electronic devices such as smartphones) were more likely to report mental health issues.” The study showed that suicide rates have more than doubled since the early 1990s and in one recent five year period, went up 65%, mainly among girls. The study found that adolescents who spent more time on non-electronic activities like socializing in person, doing sports and exercise, homework, reading print media, and [yes] participating in religious services) were less likely to report depression, suicide and similar mental illnesses.<sup>1</sup> Is the obsession with screen time the modern Herod in our homes and communities, contributing to a modern massacre of children?

There is no shortage of tyrants in our world today. Now, as then, murderous Herods slaughter the innocents. And like the magi of old, we will sometimes have to decide whose side we are on: will we collude with the tyrants or find our way home by a different way? Amen!

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<sup>1</sup> Twenge, Joiner and Rogers, “Increases in Depressive Symptoms, Suicide-Related Outcomes, and Suicide Rates Among U.S. Adolescents After 2010 and Links to Increased New Media Screen Time,” in *Clinical Psychological Science* 6:1, 3-17. <http://journals.sagepub.com/d.../full/10.1177/2167702617723376>