

A Tale of Two Fathers

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I would like to begin the sermon today with a poem by Louis Carroll... Father William
On father's day we generally think about our fathers, both literally and figuratively. By Literally, I mean our genetic father possibly the one that we grew up with until we emancipated ourselves for one reason or another. I am sure you might have heard, recently of the man who finally got out of his parent's home in his 30's although it took a court order. It seems the man had been living with his parents, not paying any rent, and refusing to get a job. So we have our genetic, biological father, or we might not. By figuratively, I mean that persons can play the role of father to us although they might not be our biological fathers. I was blessed in my growing up to have a number of father figures to whom I feel respect, caring, love, and gratitude for all that they did to love me and guide me along the way.

So, on Father's day we think about both literal and figurative fathers. And we probably have some good memories and some not so good memories, and that is the way it is. Having parents often teaches us some ways to express gratitude but also sometimes ways to express forgiveness too.

I want to bring to your attention, briefly, this morning a tale of two fathers. One father is named Herod the Great. And the other father is simply named Joseph, husband of Mary.

Let's start with Herod the Great.

Herod the Great was the ruler of the homeland of Joseph and Mary when Jesus is born. We need to differentiate him from the Herod who is ruling the area when Jesus is murdered, thirty some years later. Two different Herods. The Herod the Great was born around 73 BCE and Died around 4 BCE. History knows him as a very powerful politician who negotiated with the Roman Emperors to rule Judea. He is known as being able to manipulate political powers, but he is also known as a great builder. During his reign he builds additions to the Great Temple, a port at Ceasarea, a fortress at Masada. In the Bible he is seen in the Book of Matthew as the King to whom the Wise Men come bearing gifts and looking for the child who is born whose birth is foretold in the stars. Herod is quite threatened by the possible birth of a Child who might replace him, so he sends out his henchpersons to kill all children around Bethlehem two and under. This is one way of doing away with any political threats to your reign. The reign of Herod gets very interesting and complex because it intersects with the Emperor Augustus, the Roman Senate, Antony and Cleopatra. Herod is a master politician, and Rich man who is a despot and has a protective guard of 2,000 soldiers. He needed them. He became very mentally unbalanced trying to hang on to his power, has a number of his wives and children murdered, attempts suicide, and when he finally dies, he is not greatly missed. The Emperor says of Herod, "It is better to Herod's pig than his son." Being of the Hebrew faith, Herod would not be eating pork. So here we have one father, a powerful political figure with monies, who is not reluctant to murder his own children and the children of others in order to maintain his power.

The Second father I want to bring to your attention is Joseph, husband of Mary and Father of Jesus. In order to get into his head I want you to imagine that you are a man of 30 living in the

Reign of Herod. You are poor, being in the working class. You have no power. You are a laborer, meaning that you build things. You are engaged to a young woman named Mary, probably also from a poor family. She is probably 16 or 17. One day before you are formally married she comes to you and tells you that she is pregnant. If you can imagine this, and you can imagine that you have had no physical contact with this young girl, you can imagine that you are angry, embarrassed, confused, and part of you wants to expose her to the shame and ridicule that is the appropriate and legal consequences of her behavior. So you could demand that she undergo the Sotah. This is a religious ritual where she would be forced to drink holy water laced with dirt from the holy tabernacle and cursed multiple times. She should swell up like a balloon and then be stoned to death. Any child born to her would be called a Mamzer and not be really Jewish but only for 10 generations. Really, more than anything else you are scared- scared for the shame on you and your family if this comes out and scared for her and the child. But you love her, so you do not want to put her through the shame of the religious trials and activities that might result in her death by stoning. So you listen to this story that she tells you that she has not known another man, but that this child is from God. Sure, you think, not many guys would fall for that one. But you sleep on it, and in your sleep you have a dream, and in the dream an Angel comes and an angel tells you that this child is a child of the Higher Power. This Child is from God. And so you agree to proceed with the marriage. Then you take the mother, on the back of a mule, and head for the census. In a stable, with sheep, oxen, and animal dung, your new bride goes into labor, and you help her to deliver, and there you are. Pretty soon others join the circus, it's you, Mary, the Child, the animals, then shepherds, angels, and some Wise Guys. Then in a dream, the angel comes again, and you are told to take the child and your wife, and to hit the road to Egypt. So you do as you are told, and you hit the road. You are now a refugee fleeing for your life. You are leaving your country, your family, your friends, and your place of employment. You have almost nothing. But you go. And you stay in Egypt till you are told that it is safe to bring your child and his mother back. This is father number two for father's day. Why do we honor this father? Did he leave any buildings for us to see? No Buildings? Did he leave any commandments for us to follow, no commandments. Did he leave any creeds for us to recite, no creeds. Did he leave any scriptural sayings for us to repeat, no sayings, in fact he never speaks in any biblical passage. No buildings? No commandments? No scriptural sayings? No creeds? No great quotes, no words, nothing? Yes nothing except his actions---- marrying an unwed mother, helping to give birth to a son, loving that son, and his mother, becoming a refugee, fleeing the most powerful man around bent on his murder. Joseph, blessed Joseph. All we have are your actions this father's day.... No words, only what you did.