

Why King Herod Felt Threatened By Baby Jesus

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on January 3, 1999.
Scripture lesson: Matthew 2:1-23.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN

What a frightening and disturbing story! Some scholars say it really didn't happen. No report outside of the Bible. Secular history is silent. Others claim it really did happen. Entirely in keeping with what we know about Herod from other sources. Not surprising that it's not mentioned in secular history. Bethlehem was little. Perhaps no more than 10 or 15 boys were killed. The silence of ancient secular history is matched by the silence of modern secular history. How often do we hear about the persecution and martyrdom of Christians throughout the world today?

When we think of the persecution of Christians... Holy Innocents... Stephen... James.... The book of Revelation warns of persecution and martyrdom. Persecution of Christians under the Roman Emperor Nero. Christians blamed for the fire that destroyed Rome. Later, during the reign of Diocletian.

More Christians have died in the 20th century for their faith than any other century. n Today, we remember Christians suffering around the world because of their relationship to Christ.

1. Focus on the Middle East: Israel, Lebanon, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Syria and Egypt. Nearly 15 million Christians make their home in the Middle East. Ten million Christians live in Egypt alone. The Christian church in the Middle East is the oldest church in the world. Christians have lived and died in the Middle East since the resurrection of Jesus. Increasingly, Christians are harassed, arrested, interrogated, imprisoned, fined, or killed because of their religious beliefs and practices. In Saudi Arabia, Christians have been arrested, tortured, and beheaded. In Egypt, Christian girls have been kidnapped, raped and then forced to marry their attackers. In Israel, Christian Arabs live as second class citizens.

Hussein Ali, lives in Kuwait, a nation where the state religion of Islam opposes conversion by its citizens. Hussein left Islam to become a Christian several years ago. As a

result he was convicted for apostasy in a Kuwaiti Islamic court. The religious court recommended that Hussein should be killed because of his conversion to Christianity. According to some reports, the court also said his marriage should be dissolved and all his possessions be distributed to his heirs. Hussein remains in hiding and fears for his life. Kuwait is one of many nations where Christians are subject to religious discrimination and persecution. Increasingly, Christians are harassed, arrested, interrogated, fined, imprisoned, or killed because of their religious beliefs and practices.

2. **Now turn your attention to Africa. To Sudan.** South of Egypt. North of Ethiopia. According to our Mission Year Book the fastest growing PCUSA church in Africa is in Sudan. Sudanese Christians are also among the most vigorously persecuted. The Muslim government in Sudan has made it a crime to convert to Christianity--a policy enforced brutally. As the Khartoum government troops move south, where most Christians live, believers are given three options: convert, flee, or be killed. In southern Sudan, more than 25,000 children have been abducted and sold into slavery--some for as little as \$15. Sudanese children from Christian families are captured and placed into Islamic training camps where they are forced to learn the Qur'an, while some Christian women are reportedly raped so they will produce Muslim children. There are reports of crucifixions of Christians in remote areas.

3. **Turn your attention now to Asia. In Beijing, China's capital city of 5.9 million,** outspoken Christians are at grave risk. **Gou and her husband, Xiao** have paid a high personal price for seeking religious liberty. Xiao, a Christian intellectual, has not been seen since his arrest in April 1994. Periodically, police officers come and ask his wife, Gou, to provide clothes or money for Xiao, providing hope that he's still alive. According to Human Rights Watch/Asia, Xiao stood trial in a closed two-hour session on April 10, 1995. He was charged with several crimes, including "creating a negative atmosphere among students." But he still has not been sentenced. Under the Chinese system, prisoners can be held incommunicado until their sentencing. **Xiao, 34, came to Christian faith after the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre.** He began studying the Bible and came to the conclusion that only Christianity could solve China's

problems, which he saw as essentially problems of the heart. Xiao became active in a labor union movement. He wrote several academic articles promoting Christianity among intellectuals. Prior to his arrest, he also spoke out on behalf of Christians imprisoned for holding "illegal" religious meetings. In China, where tens of millions of Christians live, such a story is not unique.

A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation - because, long ago, King Herod, had all the boy babies in Bethlehem put to death because of their relationship to Jesus our King. Today - a voice is heard in Beijing, in Kuwait, in Sudan and hundreds of other places in the world, wailing and loud lamentation. Rachel weeping for her children; she refuses to be consoled, because they are no more.

What Can You Do? Most important, keep the suffering church in prayer. Contact Government Officials, Congressmen, Senators, Local Officials, Support Human Rights organizations like Amnesty International. Give Financial Help. Donate Food, clothing, books etc. Write letters of support to persecuted people. Get on the mailing list of Human Rights Organizations. Ask yourself if your faith in Christ is a living faith. Would you stand up in the face of persecution or would you deny your faith in Christ? If you were arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?