

THE KING'S SPEECH

ACTS 12:20-25 APRIL 29, 2020

Who was the first sitting president to visit California? The year was 1880, the man was Rutherford B. Hayes, our 19th president. Hayes was seen as a bit of a lame duck,¹ so he packed up his family on a great tour of the west. They crossed the border on what was, at the time, California's biggest holiday: Admission Day. September 9th.² General Sherman was along for part of the tour. At one stop he said this of Hayes: "[He is] no longer president of the Atlantic States or of the Mississippi States, but of all States, and which are one, and will be forever and ever."

The train carrying the president worked its way down from Oakland, through the valley en route to Los Angeles so he could attend 2 fairs that were being put on. "When the train reached Merced, Hayes was still asleep, but a brass band and crowd of shouting townspeople caused him to dress hastily, come out, and shake a dozen or so hands while the animated citizenry congratulated the sleepy chief executive."

In our text tonight, another head of state takes a trip out of the capital to be seen and to make an appearance at a festival of games. Though Herod was not exactly a lame duck, he had just suffered a public embarrassment. Peter, a prized prisoner he was hoping to use for political gain, had just escaped and was nowhere to be found. Herod, thwarted and wanting a change of scenery, travelled up to Caesarea to preside over spectacles in honor of the Emperor. There, he was well-received, not because he was a good man or a great king, but because certain people were trying to curry favor from him and save themselves from his hatefulness.

This Herod, by the way, is Herod *Agrippa*. His grandfather, Herod *The Great* was the one who killed the babies of Bethlehem. Agrippa's uncle, Herod *Antipas* was the one who killed John the Baptist. It is Agrippa's *son*, Agrippa II, before whom Paul will preach on his way to see Caesar in Acts 26. Clear as mud, right?

Herod Agrippa is an interesting character. On the one hand, we see he was a base man, a political opportunist. He was vengeful and brutal. And yet, the Jewish ruling class loved him. In fact, Jewish historians and writings *praise* him. In our text he parades as a splendid and dominating king. He was installed by Rome, but the territory he governed was as large as that ruled by his grandfather, Herod the Great.³ In fact, by 44 A.D., he had become one of the most powerful kings of the east.

On a spiritual level, we saw last time that Herod was a piece of heavy artillery in Satan's war against the Church. But after a single volley the Lord responds in swift judgment.

Some Bible dictionaries define the term 'Herod' as meaning 'the glory of the skin.'⁴ And, tonight, we'll see him decked out in *human* glory, receiving the worship of a crowd of people, who declare that he had the voice of a god. He certainly behaved as if his was the final authority. So, this evening, as we see this so-called 'great king of the east,' at the zenith of his power and prestige, I'd have us compare him with our Great and Coming King: King Jesus.

¹ John Baur *A President Visits Los Angeles: Rutherford B. Hayes' Tour of 1880*

² *ibid.*

³ 1911 Encyclopædia Britannica

⁴ Herbert Lockyer *All The Men of the Bible, Barr's Complete Index & Concise Dictionary, Brown's Dictionary*

Side by side, whatever power, whatever splendor, whatever import Herod thought he had is shown as abject refuse in comparison to the might and majesty of the One True King of all kings. And, by contrasting the foul with the flawless, we can celebrate more and more just how great and glorious our King is and prompt ourselves to joy in serving and pleasing Him.

We begin in verse 20.

Acts 12:20 - ²⁰ Herod had been very angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon. Together they presented themselves before him. After winning over Blastus, who was in charge of the king's bedroom, they asked for peace, because their country was supplied with food from the king's country.

Tyre and Sidon were not part of Herod's dominion.⁵ And we don't know what they had done to get on his bad side. We speculate that it was something petty and inconsequential, as there is no historical offense or problem recorded.

We note that Herod was a man of unconditional hate. He killed Christians indiscriminately in 12v1, he hated the people of these 2 cities categorically. So much so that he was planning to decimate their very lives. When it says he was "very angry" it means he was contemplating war. Now, as a subject of Rome, he couldn't actually send soldiers to lay siege to their towns. But he *could* start a trade war, turning off their food supply, thereby inflicting a terrible suffering on a great number of people.

Now turn and consider our Lord. The King of unconditional love. The One who never withheld compassion, not even for His betrayer. The One who, even after His crucifixion, sent His messengers again and again to the very men that conspired His murder. The King who, like a good Father, provides the daily bread that we need. The One who is our sun and our shield, who will withhold no good thing from those who do what is right.

The people of Tyre and Sidon sent a delegation to beg for peace. To do so, they had to cajole and scheme, probably through the bribery of Herod's personal attendant, Blastus.

Consider our King. He left His throne, like a shepherd going after a lost sheep. He didn't do so only once, but seeks to save each individual through human history. He knocks at *our* door, hoping we will invite Him in.

Agrippa went about in a hostile state of mind. He plotted wars in his heart and how he might harm those who slighted him. Christ Jesus sends His power and His people throughout the world to proclaim the message of *peace* with Him, despite the fact that our offenses toward God are unspeakably grotesque and treasonous. Human rebellion against the King of heaven and earth deserves total annihilation, and yet, the Lord made a way, with the Father and the Spirit, so that *He* could take our place and have God's wrath for our sin poured out on Himself instead of us.

Acts 12:21 - ²¹ On an appointed day, dressed in royal robes and seated on the throne, Herod delivered a speech to them.

⁵ Ellicot's Commentary For English Readers

Josephus records that Herod's garments that day were made wholly from *silver*. That he "was so resplendent as to spread awe over those that looked...upon him."⁶

But really, it wasn't his robe. It wasn't his throne. This impostor was no son of David. He was given charge over Judea because he had befriended Caligula and others in the Roman court. He was there because they *allowed* him to be. Earlier in life, he had to flee debtors he owed great sums to. Then he had to flee a different place after being convicted of taking a bribe. He was heard speaking to someone about how he hoped Tiberius would die, and so he was sent to prison.

Jesus Christ is a debtor to no one and lives in perfect righteousness. He is God, mighty and awesome and cannot be bribed.⁷ To Him belongs the earth and all that is in it. And, in His grace, He seeks not to enrich Himself, but to *share* His eternal inheritance with us, His children.

I will say, the silver robes worn by Herod that day must've been a sight to see. Did you know that companies are starting to infuse silver into garments? They do it, claiming that silver has antimicrobial properties and will cut down on odor. Doctors aren't too keen on the idea. While the risks are small, some worry that wearing silver could eventually wear down a person's microbiome to an undesirable degree.⁸ Others point out that "trace amounts of silver dislodged by washing them could leak into the water supply in a harmful way."

But a robe of silver ironically illustrates the corruption of the king. The plating on the outside may have looked fine in the moment, but the impurities within were inevitably bringing the green tarnish of decay.

The Psalms declare that our Lord is clothed with a robe of light.⁹ In Him is no darkness at all. And by means of His light we see light.¹⁰

We don't know what Herod said in his speech, but we know that whatever it was could only have been boasts or platitudes. After all, we've seen that from his throne only issued malice and death. Here he is, the man who would starve a city, introducing a day of games as if he were some great benefactor.

Acts 12:22 - ²²The assembled people began to shout, "It's the voice of a god and not of a man!"

It seems clear that Luke is suggesting this was part of the plan in the minds of the folks from Tyre and Sidon. They knew what kind of man Herod was. Why not get into his good graces through a little flattery and adulation?

As a side note: In the Bible, you almost *never* want to be part of a crowd of people shouting something. Certainly not in the New Testament. Going along with the crowd very quickly leads to things we don't want to be a part of. We know why they were saying it that day, it was to save their food supply, but what an obscene thing to say.

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herod_Agrippa

⁷ Deuteronomy 10:17

⁸ <https://www.sacbee.com/news/local/health-and-medicine/article33642690.html>

⁹ Psalm 104:2

¹⁰ Psalm 36:9

If Herod Agrippa was a god, we'd have to say, like the Incredible Hulk: *Puny God!* This was a man who couldn't pay his own debts *multiple* times in his life. A man who couldn't keep hold of his prisoners. A man who got where he was by betraying his own uncle and getting him banished.

And yet, they praised him as a god. Unfortunately for Herod, there was someone else in the audience that day.

Acts 12:23 - ²³At once an angel of the Lord struck him because he did not give the glory to God, and he was eaten by worms and died.

I don't usually think of angels being in attendance at Inaugurations or State of the Union Addresses, but the Bible gives us every reason to think they are. The angelic ministry may be *unseen*, but it is shown, by passages like this and by the famous story of Elisha and his worried servant, that it is all around us.

In this case, the angel had had enough of Herod's pride and willingness to receive glory that belongs only to God. And so, he strode up to the platform and struck a single blow and the fight was over. Every now and then we get a scene like this in a movie. Some fighter, pompous and impressed with themselves, swaggers into the ring or onto the battlefield. And then the other guy comes in, quietly, without making a fuss. The bell rings and one punch later it's over.

Josephus records this incident in detail. He says that Herod suffered in pain and agony for 5 days before finally dying. We remember that Luke was a doctor and so was probably being specific when he references the worms. Scholars try to decipher what he could have meant. Most of what they suggest is pretty horrifying. I'll spare you their guesses. But, on the spiritual level we can't help but connect Herod's physical death with the eternal death that awaited him. But *that* pain and torment would not end in 5 days. In the Lake of Fire, the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.¹¹

God is full of grace and mercy. He is not willing that *any* should perish but that all should come to repentance. But, along with that, He takes seriously the issue of His glory.

Isaiah says we are created *for His glory*, not our own. Jesus lived to glorify His Father. The Spirit operates in order to glorify the Son. We are to *seek* God's glory and He will not share it with another.

Acts 12:24 - ²⁴But the word of God flourished and multiplied.

Herod's words weren't worth recording. But the word of God expanded and grew like an incredible vine, bearing fruit throughout the world. Not through men like *Agrippa*, but through humble servants like we read about in verse 25:

Acts 12:25 - ²⁵After they had completed their relief mission, Barnabas and Saul returned [from] Jerusalem, taking along John who was called Mark.

Herod was a divider. Christ unites. Herod had seen to it that his uncle was thrown off the throne. Believers like Barnabas and Paul were always bringing others along, including them, inviting them in. In this case, they brought John Mark, who we believe to be Barnabas' cousin, with them from Jerusalem back to Antioch.

¹¹ Mark 9:44, 46, 48

In a final comparison of the kings we note that Jesus set about the business of bringing relief to people, while Herod sought to hurt, to withhold, to destroy.

So, why did the Jews celebrate this wicked king? As I said, Josephus, the Jewish historian, remembers him fondly. The Talmud does as well. The general populous of the time supported him. How could this be? How could this wicked, non-Jew win the hearts of Israel?

One source writes this:

“The synagogue attendant took a Torah scroll and handed it to the synagogue president, who handed it to the High Priest’s deputy, who handed it to the High Priest, who handed it to the king...King Agrippa stood and received it and read standing, and the sages praised him for doing so. When Agrippa reached the commandment of Deuteronomy 17:15 that ‘you may not put a foreigner over you’ as king, his eyes ran with tears, but they said to him, ‘Don’t fear, Agrippa, you are our brother, you are our brother!’”¹²

Agrippa is revealed to be yet another type, another precursor of that ultimate man of sin, the Antichrist. The foreigner whom the Jews will, for a time, rally behind during the Great Tribulation. Sometimes, when debating end times doctrine, people will say, “The Antichrist *must* be Jewish. The Jews would *never* accept a Gentile deliverer.” But, history has shown that isn’t true. They were happy to throw in their lot with Agrippa. One reason is that he had interceded for the Jews when his friend Caligula had wanted to defile the Temple in 41AD with a statue of himself. The Jewish people were excited about this intervention and welcomed Herod, this wicked, vile, blasphemer with open arms. The same will happen again after the church is taken up in the rapture and the Antichrist is finally revealed, carrying with him a promise to help the Jewish people.

What a comfort to reflect on the true King by seeing such a dismal counterfeit. What a glorious Lord we serve. Full of grace. Full of majesty. Full of kindness. Full of power.

There’s one more comparison we might make tonight. Look at those cowering beneath the throne of Herod, afraid of his anger. They could only hope to be spared from his hostility. But we who bow at the throne of Jesus do not live that way. We do not need to scheme to get into God’s good graces. He has poured it out over us, sending it in abundance with His peace and His presence. Instead of just hoping to be out of the *line* of fire, like the poor folks from Tyre and Sidon, we’re able to be *full* of fire. Full of the Holy Spirit. Going out to herald the greatness of our King and working to glorify His Kingdom. We get to continue to cultivate and multiply the word of God which is vibrant and powerful. We’re sent on mission to proclaim the King. The one, good, glorious King of all the ages: Jesus Christ our Lord.

¹² Eliezer Ebner *History of the Jewish People*