

THE PRESBYTERIAN OUTLOOK

Advent Devotions:
WEEK 3

Theme of Herod

"In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.' When King Herod heard this, he was frightened…calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born" (Matthew 2:1-4).

These poems and prose reflections focus on the character of Herod and the killing of innocents. We will explore themes of power, dominance and empire and contemporary correlations to war and violence.

As you attend to these daily reflections, call the innocent and oppressed to mind, and pray for the victims of violence. This Advent, we venture into this frightening and painful terrain with hope. Christ is coming. Thanks be to God.

Sunday, December 11

POEM

Slaughter of the Innocents

Arise, ye of little/no/much faith.
The hour is here and fleeting.
Strike the lintel with lambs' blood.
Stain now the crossbeams of schools,
sirens echoing Rachel's weeping,
our weeping, as Uvalde's children scream
for those younger still.

Cry to Adonai. Call down torrents of rain
from Vinnytsia's sorrow-laden clouds,
ritual cleansing of a slain toddler
beside her toppled stroller, the plagues
of cruise missiles and rocket artillery
out-populating the trampled sunflower
again and again.

And mark for protection
the foreheads of immigrant babies,
of homeless infants, of the innocent newborns
thrown out with the bathwater of war and greed
and the everyday sin of not seeing, not doing.

May the Almighty (and we) flood this post-Noah landscape
with mercy, float the crude water-cradle of Moses,
proclaim loudly the long lineage of Messiah,
ignite the dazzling star map of wise men,
cradle the already-slaughtered Lamb
cooing in the manger, for them,
especially for them. Arise
and go. Do it
now.

MARJORIE MADDOX is professor of English and creative writing at Lock Haven University in Pennsylvania, and author of 11 collections of poetry. Find more of her poetry at **marjoriemaddox.com**.

PRAYER

Have mercy, O God, on the innocents. Curb our addiction to domination and violence. Command us not to kill, again and again, so we fear you more than we fear the sins that lead us to bear arms, worship guns and then wail loudly when our violence spills into our children's lives, hiding under school desks. This Advent, as we await the birth of Emmanuel, we also await your intervention of peace. Amen.

Monday, December 12

On May 14, 2022, 18-year-old Payton S. Gendron targeted, shot and killed ten Black grocery shoppers in Buffalo, New York, with an AR-15 style rifle.

On May 15, 2022, 68-year-old David Chou killed one person and critically wounded four members of the Irvine Taiwanese Presbyterian Church in Laguna Woods, California, with a 9mm handgun.

On May 24, 2022, 18-year-old Salvador Ramos entered Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas, and fatally shot nineteen students and two teachers, and wounded seventeen others with an assault-style rifle.

On July 4, 2022, 21-year-old Robert "Bobby" E. Crimo III climbed to a rooftop in Highland Park, Illinois, with a semi-automatic rifle to shoot and kill seven people and wound dozens more attending an Independence Day parade.

PRAYER

Lord, have mercy upon us. Melt our guns into gardens, our spears into pruning hooks. Free our hearts from hate. Release the pain of those who would take others' lives from hate, turning them towards your love. Restore your order of peace. Make the lion to lie down with the lamb. Protect the innocent. Amen.

Tuesday, December 13

POEM

Villanelle for Herod and Ourselves

He is killed; the table set; the king states "Understand:
John spoke with fire, brandished force; now, silver serves his head.
These words, this flesh, my power will break; my kingdom is at hand."

"Repent and Turn, Obey the Law,' he wearied me with demands.
I promised you a plated feast, enthralled, you shall be fed.
He is killed; the table set," Herod states. "Understand?"

Such blood the warp of power unspools and — artfully! — it spans
across our gaze, the gauze of games. Thus, entertained, we've read
these words: "this flesh our power must break. Our kingdom's in your hands!"

What body's worth more than its weight when not in the rulers' plan?
Who hesitates to lose, when higher the stakes are ratcheted?
So, he is killed; the table set. All kings — states — understand

that this is what's decided when fear dances across the land:
No meal is served without victor's fare. And so the conquered?
Just words and flesh that power will break. Our kingdom is in hand.

And so and so momentum hurls. What force can force withstand?
Love. Love will tear all might apart and share in what has bled.
He is killed; the table set. All Kings, States, *understand:*
the Word Made Flesh will break your power. God's kingdom is at hand.

KATHRYN LESTER-BACON is the director of religious life at Duke University Chapel in Durham, North Carolina. She writes and shares poems for spiritual reflection on Instagram (**@pastor_poetry_practice**).

PRAYER

God of the powerful and the powerless, we praise you for breaking light into our darkness, for overwhelming hate with the shining power of love. Emmanuel, we praise you. May your kingdom come and your will be done. Amen.

Wednesday, December 14

"Nuclear blackmail, illegal annexation of territory, hundreds of thousands of Russian men rounded up and sent to the front lines in Ukraine, undersea gas pipelines to Europe mysteriously blowing up. After endless speculation, we can now say it for sure: this is how Vladimir Putin responds when he is backed into a corner." ("What if we're already fighting the third world war with Russia?," Susan Glasser, The New Yorker, September 29, 2022)

Vladimir Putin scares me. Trained as a KGB agent in counterintelligence, he epitomizes all our tropes of the evil master-manipulator who toys and tortures. In her article, Glasser describes Putin's practiced use of conflict escalation to get what he wants. Putin, she writes, "is not one to walk away from a fight or back down while losing."

Last February, as we witnessed the buildup of Russian troops on the border of Ukraine, I prayed for the elder veteran pacing an old army trench, the grandmother in her pink housecoat taking up arms, the mother and her teenagers practicing at the shooting range, the common citizens answering the call to protect their homeland. Tragically, Russia's escalation led to the brutal war we still follow today. Isn't this what we have come to expect in a world full of Herods — tyrants hell-bent on violence to steal and hoard power?

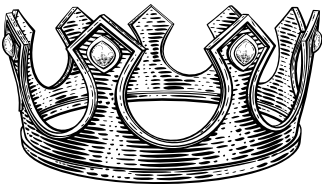
In this fresh season of conflict and human betrayal, Advent reminds us of God's alternative path and its power to send shivers down the most powerful spine. The Savior to come is the Prince of Peace. The birth of Jesus escalates the power of love, against which evil stands no chance.

PRAYER

God of grace, have mercy. We've heard that the arc of the universe bends towards justice, but we watch the nightly news in horror and doom-scroll through reports of bombs falling on the innocent. Our hearts lament the war in Ukraine and we groan over the atrocities laying waste to lives, homes, and communities there and in the Middle East, Africa, and other conflicts. Turn us, and help us turn others, from the evil path of destruction, domination and violence. This Advent, remind us of the power of your love. Amen.

Thursday, December 15

POEM



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Heartbreak

All megalomaniacs have fear
They'll be dethroned, from far, or near;
Thus, nothing stops them from their ends,
Including children, whom they'll rend
From life and parents, by all means
Necessary! Thus it still seems
That holding power for its sake
Can only end in great heartbreak.

SCOTT L. BARTON is an honorably retired member of the Presbytery of Philadelphia who had pastorates in Northern New York, Vermont and Philadelphia. Now living in western Massachusetts, he enjoys writing, hiking and singing with Boston Symphony's Tanglewood Festival Chorus. His latest book is *Lectionary Poems, Year C: Even More Surprising Grace for Pulpit and Pew.*

PRAYER

God of righteous rage and holy pursuits, humble the powerful who use their positions for evil, self-serving ends. Strike such fear in their hearts that they will turn from evil and claim your life-saving path of peace. Protect the innocents from tyranny so all your children may know peace and security. Amen.

Friday, December 16

"Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." 19th century British politician Lord Acton is credited as coining this phrase, but he drew on ideas expressed by others about absolute monarchies where all power is either given, or taken, by the monarch.

In 1 Samuel 8 we hear God warn his people about giving power to a king. "You shall be his slaves," God warns in 1 Samuel 8:17. But the people refused to listen. They wanted to be like the other nations governed by kings.

The story of King Herod manifests all God's warnings. Herod identified as a Jew but supported Rome and its oppression of his people. Herod was rewarded for his betrayal by being given the title "King of the Jews" by the Roman senate. He was known among his people as ambitious and ruthless — a king who would order the killing of all the babies in order to eliminate the threat of one.

Not all power is bad. "Power is the ability to achieve a purpose," said Martin Luther King Jr. "Whether or not it is good or bad depends upon the purpose." The child born "King of the Jews" was a threat to Herod's power because of Christ's purpose. Christ came to save, not oppress. Christ's power is love, not threats. Despite Herod's influence and authority, this newborn King would thrive, his legacy more lasting than any tyrant.

PRAYER

Savior God, powerful people control and oppress, but you call us to love and lift up. As we await the birth of our king, help us reflect on your purpose for our lives together. Usher in your reign of love and peace. Amen.

Saturday, December 17

POEM



Innocents

I have held within my arms a child emerging
from deep sleep's cocoon, limbs softened, secure,

wrapped in a blanket the color of sky.
His damp skin smelled like salt and dreaming.

Does it make a difference what language
he speaks or the hue of his face or who

his parents are or who might feel threatened
by the breath he breathes, which he refuses

to quit breathing, in and out, in and out,
in and out? I want to say *No*, shout it until

the wings of my heart beat against
the growing bones of his body, feathering

those languid limbs, making wings, gifting
flight. But it does. It does

because, in this world,
it will.

KATHRYN LESTER-BACON is the director of religious life at Duke University Chapel in Durham, North Carolina. She writes and shares poems for spiritual reflection on Instagram (**@pastor_poetry_practice**).

PRAYER

God, thank you for the child who brings us hope in this season of dark despair. Open our hearts to all your children in need of our welcome and care. This Advent, we pray for the protection of innocents. We pray for lives threatened by violence to know safety, security and peace. Amen.