I have been blessed to have hosted several thousand pilgrims to Israel. I have no way to adequately tell you how much I love the Holy Land. Everyday, I repeat this to my pilgrims: THIS IS A LAND OF REAL PEOPLE WHO LIVED IN THIS VERY REAL PLACE IN REAL TIME! Try to put yourself in the sandals of the people in this story - remembering they were what we would call today “headline stories.”

Matthew 2:1-12

Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, [2] Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him. [3] When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. [4] And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born. [5] And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet, [6] And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel. (Micah 5:2) [7] Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared. [8] And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also. [9] When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was. [10] When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. [11] And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh. [12] And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way.

Matthew 2:16-20

Then Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceeding wroth, and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently enquired of the wise men. [17] Then was fulfilled that which was spoken
by Jeremy (Jeremiah 31:15) the prophet, saying, [18] In Rama (a region south of Jerusalem which would have included Bethlehem) was there a voice heard, lamentation, and weeping, and great mourning, Rachel (considered a “mother of Israelis) weeping for her children, and would not be comforted, because they are not.

[19] But when Herod was dead, behold, an angel of the Lord appeareth in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, [20] Saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and go into the land of Israel: for they are dead which sought the young child’s life.

This is a very factual story, told not only in sacred Scripture but also in secular history. King Herod will occupy much of our time in this opening segment of tonight’s study.

WAS HEROD REALLY “THE GREAT?” OR THE “NOT SO GREAT?”

By every historical standard - with the exception of humanitarian - yes, he was “great.” But if you consider humanity, Herod would have been labeled as despicable, a tyrant, a butcher. Let’s take a look at this man so influential in the history of our Lord’s Incarnation, this man who made such a profound impact in the Biblical epic.

....In Real Time...

I take you back in time to the death of Julius Caesar (45 BC) and the resulting 30 year fight for control of Rome between Marc Antony and Octavian (who won and was then known as Caesar Augustus).

Living in that time was a man named ANTIPATER, who came from Idumaea, a region just east of the Dead Sea in southern Israel. He had several sons, among whom was young Herod who was named Governor of Galilee around 47 BC. Several years later, forces from northern Iran (Parthians - Persians) attacked both Syria and Palestine (as it was then known). Jerusalem was captured and Herod fled to Rome (his brother committed suicide). A man named Antigonus was installed as ruler in Rome for a short time.

Herod was extremely clever and while in Rome he gained the favor of both Octavian (who became Augustus) and Antony. Marc Antony was dispatched to Jerusalem where he forced the Parthians to the eastern side of the Euphrates River. Herod returned to Jerusalem with Roman soldiers and retook the Holy City in 37 BC. This began his long and reign as King of Judea (or better-known King of the Jews.)

The battle between Octavian and Antony was now reaching a climax and it ended at the
Battle of Actium in 31 BC. With Antony dead by his own hand, and Cleopatra, too, Herod had a free hand to expand his kingdom. Within a decade or so, he had expanded his kingdom into northern Galilee. He had also given Judea a favorable position with the rest of the known world.

THE BUILDER

Now in solid control of his kingdom, Herod began a series of grand building projects. Each Jew in his kingdom is believed to have ante-d up a half-shekel tax. Far from being something to rankle his subjects, his building projects created terrific employment and

This fabulous “model” of Jerusalem as it was in Jesus’ time is one of our delightful stops in Jerusalem (at the Israeli Museum). You can see by the pictures of several spectators how large an area was covered in the Old City by Herod’s Temple. The person in the forefront is standing at what would be the Mount of Olives, looking across the Kidron Valley toward the west.

boosted Judea’s economy. His most famous project was a lavish refurbishment of the Temple in Jerusalem. The original one, constructed a thousand years earlier by King Solomon, had been destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BC. The massive flat area upon which the Temple and courts rested is artificially bolstered by massive buried arches and walls (such as western wall “wailing wall”) and still stand today.
Herod’s building projects were not restricted to Jerusalem. He improved several fortresses, notably at Jericho, where he later died, and the historically famous Masada on the western shore of the Dead Sea. He took the former capital of the ten-tribe state of Israel (done following the split of the Kingdom following Solomon’s death), Samaria, and renamed it Sebaste. He also built a palace in Caesarea Maritima (by the Sea) and his engineers designed an underwater port facility.

The Herodium

Each time I visit Bethlehem, my attention is drawn toward the east of the shepherd’s fields. There is a volcano-shaped, massive structure located on the edge of the Judean desert where the topography drops to the Dead Sea. This classic cone-shaped mountain was begun by the King in 37 BC upon his victory the Persians (Parthians). It was designed to be a place of safety for the king and his family in case of uprising against him. I have toured through the entire structure on several occasions. In Herod’s day, it was three stories taller than it remains now; however, the inner palace plunges deep into the earth. (This Herodium was later used in a second uprising against Rome led by Bar Kohkba around 132 AD and was the ‘last hurrah’ for the Jews for generations.)

The huge palace was supplied with water by a system of aqueducts. It was completed just a few years before Jesus’ birth. Some scholars think perhaps Herod was there when the Magi appeared.

Herod did not go “gentle into that good night” but the longer he was on the throne the nastier it got. He had several battles with the Nabateans (Petra area), finally getting assistance from Caesar Augustus to subdue them.

Herod might have been a great builder but he was a lousy husband and father. He was married 10 times and had several of them executed - among them his “favorite”, Mariamme. He suspected she was plotting against him and had her dispatched in 29 BC. Their two sons also came under suspicion and were executed, along with his oldest son Antipater by another wife.

Flavius Josephus, a well-known historian from that very time, wrote about Herod’s last days. The words are not pleasant to read but they give us an understanding of the King’s state of mind upon being approached by the Magi with news of a “new-born king.”

"After this, distemper seized Herod’s whole body and greatly disordered all his parts with various symptoms; for there was a gentle fever upon him, and an intolerable itching over all the surface of his body, and continual pains in his colon, and dropsical
A drawing of the Herodium, looking toward the east.

tumors about his feet, and an inflammation of the abdomen, and a putrefaction of his manhood which produced worms. Besides which he had a difficulty of breathing and could not breathe but when he sat upright and had a convulsion of all his members. He went over Jordan and made use of those hot baths. Here the physicians thought proper to bathe his whole body in warm oil; whereupon his eyes failed him and he came and went as if he were dying. He then returned back and came to Jericho.....

Flavius Josephus / Wars of the Jews / chapter xxxiii page 468 / Kregel Publications

This is the king, sick, violent, suspicious, and dying, who was approached by some strange visitors from the East (Persia) inquiring about a newborn King of the Jews.

THE WISE MEN FROM THE EAST

Our Lord Jesus was not very old when already men had divergent viewpoints about Him. Three sets of values emerged quickly – values still employed today.

- As we have seen on the previous pages, Herod’s reaction was one of hatred and hostility. He was the forerunner of Jesus’ enemies who wanted Him dead. One historian called Herod “a murderous old man.” That description was pinpoint
accurate. The world is still filled with many who feel the same as Herod about
the Christ of God. They want Him out of their way. They want to be free “to do
their thing.” And no majestic Lord of the universe is going to alter that choice.

A person who has decided to live his life the way he pleases is directly opposed
to Jesus. A Christian is a person whose greatest pleasure is to do the will of God.

- The reaction of the scribes and priests was one of indifference to Christ. They
were the professional religionists, the church-goers, the law keepers. Their
religious life would go right on without Jesus Christ. He didn’t make any
difference to them at all. Their lives were taken up with rituals and legalities. A
person is a fool who is consumed by small joys here and forfeits what God has
planned for him or her for eternity

- The reaction of the wise men was adoring worship. They had journeyed hundreds
of miles for the sole privilege of laying gifts at Jesus’ feet.

THREE OR THREE HUNDRED?

Scripture does not limit their number to three. The figure three is probably due to the
fact that they brought three gifts, gold, frankincense and myrrh. The wise men could
have come in a caravan with any number of magi. Their journey originated in far-away
Persia. What gifts they brought!

Gold

They brought gold because that was the gift for a king! These “easterners” must have
understood full well that Christ would never take His earthly throne by force. He did not
come to lead armies, yet He was born to be the King of Kings ruling over men’s hearts.
One never fully understands the majesty of Christ until he or she recognizes Him as the
King. You and I will never meet Jesus on the basis of equality. We can come to Him
only on the basis of full and complete submission.

I love the story of Admiral Nelson. History records that he always treated his
vanquished enemies with respect and dignity. Following one of his great victories, he
brought the defeated admiral onto his ship. The foe remembered that Nelson had a
reputation of courtesy and he walked over to meet him with outstretched hand, as if he
were approaching an equal. However, he stopped short when Nelson said, “Your sword
first, and then your hand.” You and I can be the closest of friends with Jesus Christ, but
first we must submit to His total authority in our lives. Remember – He is not only our
Savior, but He is also our LORD!
Frankincense

This was the gift for a priest. Upon entering the Great Temple in Jerusalem, one could smell the sweet fragrance of frankincense used in the sacrifices. A priest knew that aroma so well as he went about his duties of building a bridge between God and men. (The Latin word for priest is pontifex, which means “a bridge-builder.”)

And what a bridge Christ has built between our lowly, sinful estate and God’s righteousness and holiness! Before Jesus came, admission to God’s presence was given only to the chosen high priest. But Christ opened the way for every man. His life and death made it possible for anyone who wishes to inherit eternal life to enjoy the richness of God’s presence. What a fitting gift for Jesus! Frankincense for the Great High Priest.

The third gift was prophetic in nature.

Myrrh

Myrrh is the gift for one who is to die. It is a natural gum or resin extracted from a number of small, thorny tree species of the genus Commiphora. Myrrh resin has been used throughout history as a perfume, incense and medicine. It was also used at times in embalming.

There is a famous painting (artist: Hunt) of Jesus. He is standing at the door of the carpenter’s shop in His little hometown of Nazareth. He is still a boy and his arms and legs have grown weary in His work at the bench. So He stands in the doorway with His arms stretched out. The sun is shining brightly on Him, casting a shadow of a cross behind Him. And there is a part of that painting that is so poignant – in the background is His mother Mary. She has seen the shadow of the cross. And the look in her eyes indicates fully that she is aware of the coming death of her Son.

But that is why He came. Jesus was the greatest of communicators but He didn’t some to preach. His lofty ideals were above and beyond any philosopher’s, but He didn’t come to be an example alone. He left Judea and Galilee with hundreds of people whom He had healed, but even that is not why He came. No, Jesus came to give His life for them as the atoning sacrifice on Calvary. The Christmas story is the beginning of the grand message completed at Easter – the message of salvation and victory.

King Herod chose to rebel against that salvation. He set himself against the only
Begotten of God. Most of the great buildings he constructed now lie forgotten in the
dust. At best they are archeological ruins. But Herod’s soul is very much alive at this
very moment – and it is far too late for him to change now.

The priests and scribes chose to ignore the birth of Jesus. You can ignore it, too, if you
wish. You might have gathered last week around the family Christmas tree with your
loved ones and exchanged presents without ever thinking of the real impact, the eternal
meaning, of this glorious season.

But the wise men chose to come to Christ at great inconvenience to themselves - at great
risk and doubtless huge cost. But they could say to their friends for the rest of their lives
that they had knelt at the feet of the Messiah, Jesus, the Christ of God.

The Wise Men Head Home

Matthew reminded us that Herod set a trap: Matthew 2:8 And he sent them to
Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have
found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also. But an
angel of the Lord sent the wise men home a different way: Matthew 2:12 And being
warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into
their own country another way.

Hearing that he had been out-witted, Herod ordered the “slaughter of the innocents” - the
slaying of all children two and under in Bethlehem. Some scholars have estimated the
number of the slain was somewhere around 25. Remember, Bethlehem was just a very
small town at the time. But God warned Joseph to protect the young child. Matthew
2:13-14 And when they were departed, behold, the angel of the Lord appeareth to
Joseph in a dream, saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and flee
into Egypt, and be thou there until I bring thee word: for Herod will seek the young
child to destroy him. [14] When he arose, he took the young child and his mother by
night, and departed into Egypt:

King Herod lived but a short time thereafter: Matthew 2:19-23 But when Herod was
dead, behold, an angel of the Lord appeareth in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, [20]
Saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and go into the land of
Israel: for they are dead which sought the young child's life. [21] And he arose, and
took the young child and his mother, and came into the land of Israel. [22] But when
he heard that Archelaus (Herod’s son) did reign in Judaea in the room of his father
Herod, he was afraid to go thither: notwithstanding, being warned of God in a
dream, he turned aside into the parts of Galilee: [23] And he came and dwelt in a
city called Nazareth: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, He shall be called a Nazarene.

THE “LOST YEARS” OF JESUS

Our Scriptural knowledge of Jesus from His infancy to His 3 ½ years of ministry, starting around age 30, is very limited with several exceptions:

Mary and Joseph Dedicate Jesus

Luke 2:22-33

And when the days of her purification according to the law of Moses * were accomplished, they brought him to Jerusalem, to present him to the Lord; [23] (As it is written in the law of the Lord, Every male that openeth the womb shall be called holy to the Lord;) [24] And to offer a sacrifice according to that which is said in the law of the Lord, A pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons. [25] And, behold, there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon; and the same man was just and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel: and the Holy Ghost was upon him. [26] And it was revealed unto him by the Holy Ghost, that he should not see death, before he had seen the Lord’s Christ. [27] And he came by the Spirit into the temple: and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him after the custom of the law, [28] Then took he him up in his arms, and blessed God, and said, (29] Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word: (30] For mine eyes have seen thy salvation,

* Purification According to the Old Testament Hebrew Scriptures, a woman is impure for seven days following vaginal child birth. So Jesus would have been brought to the Temple within two weeks of His birth for the ceremonial dedication of His life.

In most evangelical churches (those that take the Bible at face value, believing it is the total revealed mind of God to mankind) children are not baptized. Infant baptism is a man-conceived doctrine, noted as late as 250 AD. Both in the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament, infants were ceremonially dedicated to God:

The great Hebrew prophet Samuel was dedicated to God as an infant:  1 Samuel 1:27-28

For this child I prayed; and the Lord hath given me my petition which I asked of him: [28] Therefore also I have lent him to the Lord; as long as he liveth he shall be lent to the Lord.
Jesus At The Great Temple When He Was Twelve Years Old

Luke 2:39-52

And when they had performed all things according to the law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own city Nazareth. [40] And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, filled with wisdom: and the grace of God was upon him. [41]

Now his parents went to Jerusalem every year at the feast of the passover. [42] And when he was twelve years old, they went up to Jerusalem after the custom of the feast. [43] And when they had fulfilled the days, as they returned, the child Jesus tarried behind in Jerusalem; and Joseph and his mother knew not of it. [44] But they, supposing him to have been in the company, went a day's journey; and they sought him among their kinsfolk and acquaintance. [45] And when they found him not, they turned back again to Jerusalem, seeking him. [46] And it came to pass, that after three days they found him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the doctors, both hearing them, and asking them questions. [47] And all that heard him were astonished at his understanding and answers. [48] And when they saw him, they were amazed: and his mother said unto him, Son, why hast thou thus dealt with us? behold, thy father and I have sought thee sorrowing. [49] And he said unto them, How is it that ye sought me? wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business? [50] And they understood not the saying which he spake unto them. [51] And he went down with them, and came to Nazareth, and was subject unto them: but his mother kept all these sayings in her heart. [52] And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man.

It was March 1971. A blanket of snow covered Jerusalem and the surrounding area. All tourism stopped. I called an Arab friend in Bethlehem and asked him if he had a car that could handle the inclement conditions. He assured me he did and I hired his services for a day. Imagine our surprise when he loaded Darlene and me into a VW bug!

He drove us north of Jerusalem into the Judaean hills to a community known as Ramallah. Its elevation is 2800 feet above sea level and thus enjoys summer breezes. Today the metro area of Ramallah is over 60,000. But in the days of Jesus it was just a small village with a lovely spot for travelers to stop and rest. My Arab friend informed us that it is believed to be the place where Joseph and Mary stopped enroute home to Nazareth after being in Jerusalem. It is believed to be here that they missed Jesus. In all probability the men and women traveled in separate caravans, Joseph and Mary each thinking Jesus was with the other.

Now a frantic search ensued, backtracking to Jerusalem. There they found Jesus in the Great Temple, listening to the teachers and priests.
You can find numerous fictitious stories of Jesus adolescence in fanciful books. Luke put a high premium on eyewitness confirmation. Perhaps this story was remembered by Mary: Luke 2:51 And he went down with them, and came to Nazareth, and was subject unto them: but his mother kept all these sayings in her heart.

The fact was that somewhere north of Jerusalem Joseph and Mary had lost track of Jesus. They found him among Jewish scholars in the Temple.

Here are several truths that are important for us to know:

- At this young age, Jesus already had an insatiable appetite for Biblical truth. The 12th year was the final year of preparation for a Jewish lad before he entered full participation in the religious life of the synagogue and was celebrated by Bar Mitzvah. Perhaps Jesus wanted to demonstrate for those who had intelligence enough to comprehend that He would be far more than an ordinary Jewish youngster. His insight into the Word was more profound than ordinary teens and His relationship to God was unique.
- One must wonder at what point in Jesus’ young life He became aware that He was
the Son of God. At what point the divine and human nature united in Jesus. How could God “increase in wisdom” as verse 52 informs us? Apparently the incarnate Christ restrained or surrendered the use of His divinity as He grew in human stature. He was God, to be sure, but He was also man.

Here is the point we should make: Mary rebuked her Son when she said, “Your father and I have been looking for You.” But Jesus responded, “You should have known I would be at the house of MY FATHER.” In His development Jesus already fully understood that He was born of a virgin. He recognized His unique sonship to God and that His mission would require of Him a devotion to God’s purposes that would take precedence over the closest family ties. He would follow His calling even though it brought pain and misunderstanding.

Next week, we leap ahead a bit to study THE HEALING JESUS. My dear friends Donna and Winston Blackwood (R.W.) will be here along with their daughter. Donna was incredibly healed of cancer that most certainly would have claimed her life. I have heard her remarkable testimony of THE HEALING JESUS. It is well worth your time! At the close of the time we will pray for the sick.