

Sermon

The wilderness of waiting: the king who feared Christmas

Psalm 33:1–12 | Matthew 2:1–15

Sunday, December 28, 2025

First Presbyterian Church Grand Junction

Opening Prayer

Introduction: Waiting After Christmas

Well—first of all—Merry Christmas again. Remember, there are twelve days in the celebration of Christmas!

For us as Christians, this is one of the holiest seasons of the year. Advent has led us, week by week, to Bethlehem—to the manger—to the birth of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world.

Throughout Advent, we have said that this season is about **waiting**—not passive waiting, but active waiting; a posture of preparation, attentiveness, and hope.

Now, at least according to the calendar, Advent is over. Christmas has arrived.

And yet, for one more week, we remain in this series on **the wilderness of waiting**.

Over the last several Sundays, we've walked alongside familiar companions on the Advent journey:

- Elizabeth and Zechariah,
- Mary and Joseph,
- and the shepherds, watching their flocks by night.

Faithful people. Vulnerable people. People waiting for God in wilderness they did not choose.

Today, however, we encounter a very different figure. When I think about this character in the context of this series, I can't help but think of that old phrase: *"One of the above is not like the others."*

Today, we meet **Herod the Great** (at least, he thought he was).

Herod forces us to confront an uncomfortable truth: Waiting, by itself, is not enough.

I. Herod: A Man Who Was Waiting—But for the Wrong Thing (*Matthew 2:1–8*)

Matthew begins this part of the story with careful details:

"In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem..."

Matthew situates us precisely. Jesus has already been born. The incarnation has already occurred. God has already acted. But not everyone responds to that action in the same way.

The Magi arrived in Jerusalem—political, religious, and symbolic center of power—and they asked a question that sounded simple enough:

"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."

This was not a demand, accusation, or threat—at least not on the surface. Instead, It was a question of worship, but *not* from devout Jews. I think the text is clear that this Magi were *not* Jews. If they were, they would not have said, "king of the Jews" – they would have

said “our king”, or something close to that. Likely, the magi were *Zoroastrians* (you can google this), likely from Persia or Babylon, whose beliefs included the ritualistic use of fire, and interpreting matters of consequence from the alignment and movement of stars.

Even those who were seen as outsider the covenant between God and Jewish people knew the importance of what was to come. But the inclusion of the Magi *also* foreshadowed a powerful Gospel truth: Christ came for Jews, *and* for the whole world. The offer of God’s grace in Christ was and is not limited by ethnicity, by border, or by tribe.

Back to the text. The Magi asked the question:

“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.”

Matthew’s Gospel tells us:

“When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him.”

That single sentence tells us more about Herod than pages of description ever could. Herod was frightened—not confused, not curious, not discerning, but afraid. Why? Because Herod understood exactly what the Magi were insinuating:

A rival king had been born.

Notice this: Matthew says “*all Jerusalem* was frightened with him.” This does not mean that the whole city was terrified of the question from the Magi. Instead, it means that fear has a way of radiating outward from the powerful. When those in authority are anxious,

instability spreads. Herod's fear was not private; it became contagious. But even in his fear, Herod did what powerful, calculating people often do when they are afraid—he gathered information to protect himself.

Matthew continues:

“Then he called together all the chief priests and scribes of the people and inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.”

Herod knew enough to know where to look. He brought together the religious experts. He asked the right question. And they gave him the right answer:

“In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet...”

Herod learned the truth, location, and the promise. Ignorance was not his problem. Herod's issue was not lack of information—it was lack of rightly ordered love. What should have led him to worship intensified his fear instead, and he began to plot and strategize. He gathered details, he calculated timelines, and he measured risk.

This too was a kind of waiting—but not the kind we saw in Elizabeth, Mary, Joseph, or the shepherds. They waited with openness, but Herod waited with suspicion. They waited to receive, and Herod waited to neutralize.

Finally, Herod sent the Magi on their way:

“Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” The words were pious, but the intention was not. Herod spoke the language of worship, but his heart was fixed on control. This is the

most dangerous kind of religious posture: the appearance of faith masking sinister intent. Herod was certainly waiting—but he was waiting in the wilderness for the wrong thing.

And this is why Herod belongs so decisively in this series, especially at the end. Herod shows us that waiting can be vigilant and still be faithless. Waiting can be patient and still be poisonous. Waiting can be active and still be deeply disordered. This kind of waiting does not open us to God. Instead, it closes us against Him.

II. Disordered Love and Corrupted Waiting

Here it is helpful to draw on the wisdom of Augustine of Hippo, who was a Bishop and theologian from the 3rd/4th century AD. In my view, Augustine is the third most important figure in Western Christianity (first is Jesus, and the second is the apostle Paul).

In his many writings, Augustine taught that sin is not simply loving bad things—but also includes loving good things in the wrong order, or in the wrong way. Augustine argued that when love for God is not first, every other love becomes *distorted*, and distorted love leads to the sin of idolatry.

I think this insight unlocks Herod's story. Herod loved stability. He loved being king! Neither of these things were inherently evil. But because Herod did not love God first, those loves turned *inward* and violent, and so Herod's waiting became corrupted.

This is a warning that we need, but do not often hear: Waiting alone is not virtue. Instead, our waiting, including our waiting in the wilderness, must be shaped by rightly ordered love.

III. Psalm 33: God's Faithfulness Versus Human Schemes

This is where Psalm 33 speaks with remarkable clarity into Herod's story.

The psalmist declares:

“For the word of the Lord is upright,
and all his work is done in faithfulness.” (v. 4)

Herod acted as though God's promises are fragile, as though God's purposes require manipulation, secrecy, and violence to survive. Psalm 33 says otherwise. It says,

“The Lord brings the counsel of the nations to nothing;
he frustrates the plans of the peoples.” (v. 10)

Herod schemed, plotted, and later in Matthew's text, he ordered unimaginable violence.

And yet, despite his attempt to control what happened next,

- the Magi did *not* return,
- Joseph *was* warned,
- the child *did* escape
- God's promises *did* continue.
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Herod's plans failed because God is faithful.

Psalm 33 names a hard truth:

Disordered love always overestimates its own power
and underestimates God's sovereignty.

IV. A Self-Inflicted Wilderness—And Corrective Grace

(Matthew 2:13–15)

It is important to emphasize that Herod's wilderness of waiting was real—but it was also self-inflicted. His fear isolated him; his

suspicion corroded him; and his hunger for control drove him toward brutality. But God's faithfulness was greater than Herod's violence:

Matthew continues the narrative this way: **"Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.'"*

Please notice what God did NOT do:

God did not remove Herod from power. God did not cancel the danger. God did not make the wilderness disappear. Instead, God **warned**.

The angel's command was abrupt and disruptive: *"Get up* (this is an imperative, and it literally means "get moving, NOW!"), *take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt."* This was not a triumphant journey. It was not a procession of glory. It was flight. It was displacement. It was exile.

Egypt was not a neutral destination. For Mary and Joseph and their fellow Jews, Egypt carried deep memories of bondage, fear, and survival under threat. The Savior of Israel was preserved not by strength, but by vulnerability. Not by force, but by obedience. Joseph's response is recorded without commentary or embellishment: *"Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt."*

This is wilderness obedience—faithfulness enacted with partial information, at great personal cost, in the dark. Joseph did not defeat Herod. He simply refused to play Herod's game, and instead

trusted God's command. Matthew concludes this portion of the story with a line that is easy to miss, but theologically rich:

“And he remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, ‘Out of Egypt I have called my son.’” (Matthew 2:15)

The phrase *“he remained there”* matters. The text does not rush us forward. It does not tell us how long the family stayed, only that they stayed **until** Herod's life and power finally ran its course. It also tells us that the wilderness did not end immediately. Safety did not arrive all at once. Waiting continued, even after the promised birth of the savior.

In this narrative, Herod's waiting was frantic and violent, driven by fear and disordered love. Joseph's waiting, by contrast, was patient and obedient, grounded in trust. Both were in wilderness—but only one of those wildernesses could form life. Herod created chaos to preserve control. Joseph submitted to displacement to preserve the child. One waited to eliminate threat; the other waited to remain faithful. And while Herod's plans unraveled, God's purposes quietly continued.

Matthew tells us that even this forced exile fulfilled Scripture. The God who once called Israel out of Egypt called His Son out of Egypt. What looked like interruption was, in fact, continuity. What looked like danger, what looked like a very wrong road was folded into the faithfulness of God.

But life is full of wrong roads. As you will hear in my sermons, I am a big fan of C.S. Lewis. I am not sure if I would be a Christian without his influence in my life. Lewis was well-acquainted with the “wrong roads” of life – those events and circumstances that seem like

nothing but pain in the moment but are God's hard but good way of putting us on the path of His will for our lives. In his later years, Lewis quipped, "*God uses all the wrong roads to lead us to all the right places.*" I think this is true, and well-supported by scripture. Over and over again, God uses what we see as adverse and hard circumstances to bring about His will in our lives. God uses the crucible and the wilderness—experiences and places that we would rather avoid—to make us more like Jesus.

This is where we must be careful (and hopefully pastoral). The good news of this text is **not** that wilderness is painless. The flight to Egypt is costly. It involves real fear, uncertainty, and loss. This family became refugees because of another person's sin and disordered love.

The Good News is that even here—God was at work. God did not abandon the story to Herod's fear. God did not allow violence to have the final word. God did not leave disordered love unopposed.

This is what grace looks like. God resists what destroys us—not out of anger, but out of love. God frustrates false securities because they cannot save us. God allows certain wildernesses to persist because they expose what must be healed and redeemed in our lives. Herod's wilderness hardened him, and Joseph's wilderness shaped him. The difference is not circumstance; it is trust.

And that, perhaps, is the quiet hope of this text: wilderness will come, sometimes by forces beyond us, sometimes by choices within us. But God remains faithful still, calling His people forward, even through exile, even through fear, even through the long road that leads us home.

V. A Final Advent Warning—and Invitation

As we close this series, as we prepare to move into 2026, Herod leaves us with questions we cannot avoid: In the afterglow of Christmas, who and what are we waiting for? Are we waiting to receive God, or are we trying to preserve ourselves? Are we waiting with trust, or with fear? Are we guarding space for Christ, or are we guarding what we refuse to surrender?

In the seasons of Advent and Christmas, God does not only ask us to wait. Instead, God calls and equips us to **reorder our loves** by conforming our whole lives to Jesus. Because when God is first,

- waiting becomes hope,
- wilderness becomes formation,
- and fear gives way to trust.

Herod feared Christmas because Christ threatened his throne. But Christ did not come to steal our lives—instead, He came to give them back, rightly ordered, rightly loved, and made whole.

Conclusion

As we step beyond Advent and into the life God is calling us to live together in 2026, may we learn not only how to wait—but how to wait **well** – for the right things, in the right way, at the right time.

Amen. Let's pray.