

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Sermon manuscript

### **Sermon Series: Follow the Leader**

#### **Following Jesus into Community**

(various passages)

Study #2

#### **Introduction:** Role models we have known and loved...<sup>1</sup>

One of the giants of the evangelical world in these days is San Antonio's own Max Lucado. Max is a pulpit master and a best-selling author. He has earned national and international respect for his teaching and for his life.

When word spread that he was stepping down from a primary leadership role at Oak Hills Church in 2007, lots of us wondered who would replace him. Who would replace Max Lucado?

Well, it was announced early in 2008 that after serving for several years at Willow Creek Community Church in Chicago, Randy Frazee would become the Senior Minister at Oak Hills Church.

I was told by a member of Oak Hills that Randy's first Sunday there was great. But Randy didn't miss the opportunity to highlight the fact that he knew he was following in the footsteps of a giant.

While Max is a pretty good-sized man, Randy is much smaller. At the start of his message he revealed that he had brought one of Max's shoes to the pulpit with him.

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<sup>1</sup> I am deeply indebted to Eugene Peterson for the insights into the Herod vs. Jesus and Pharisees vs. Jesus contrasts presented in a series of lectures titled "Follow the Leader" delivered at Regent College (Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada) in 2000.

He held the shoes up for the people of Oak Hills to see and compare. His shoe was dwarfed by Max's shoe.

After having been at Oak Hills for a year, it is clear that Randy Frazee isn't trying to be Max. Randy is his own guy and is providing great leadership at Oak Hills. But the thought of having big shoes to fill may help us think about role models.

Over the years there have been role models who have pointed the way forward for me in lots of ways. Many of these role models have been people I've gotten to know here at church.

- Selfless servants have prompted me to follow after their example.
- Generous givers have impressed me and motivated me to grow in the grace of generosity.
- Godly, engaged fathers inspired me twenty some-odd years ago to be the kind of dad they were to their sons and daughters.
- Passionate pray-ers have been my role models for growing as a prayer warrior.
- Honest, genuine, transparent people have been my relational role models.
- I've even used Master Gardeners in the church as my role models for planting vegetables!

You may be able to think of role models in any of a number of life arenas, people who have inspired you, urged you forward, motivated you to grow into something more than you are, or provided you with a path to get to where you want to be.

Role models are helpful and important. But you and I should choose carefully the role models we decide to follow. We will be defined by the footsteps we trail behind.

In these weeks we are learning how to "follow the Leader", our Leader being Jesus. Today, we'll discover what our Leader did with two of the more prominent leadership and lifestyle role models available to Him.

When Jesus went public with His claims to be the long-awaited Jewish Messiah, there were a variety of role models available to Him as He sought a life of impact for God.

This morning I want to examine two of those potential role models.

Neither of these role models would have been ideal. But, if you and I had been living in the first century, it would have been reasonable for us to assume that Jesus would have walked in the steps, would have imitated the ways, or would have at least borrowed ideas from one or the other of them.

First, I propose that we look at the life of the King who was ruling Palestine at the time Jesus was born: Herod the Great. While naming Herod as a possible role model for Jesus may seem surprising, there are compelling reasons why I mention him as a role model Jesus might have been drawn to follow, at least in part.

### **Role Model #1 - HEROD (the great)**

#### **Biography**

##### *Family*

Herod was the Roman installed king of the Jews at the time Jesus was born. He himself was not a Jew. He was an Idumean. Idumeans were descendants of Esau (Edom), the brother of Jacob, who was the father of the twelve sons who became the heads of the twelve tribes of Israel.

Herod's father, Antipater, was the first of the Herod family to be appointed to government rule.<sup>2</sup> Herod followed in his father's footsteps as a ruler in Palestine at the age of twenty five, first serving as governor of the northern territory of Galilee.

Herod attracted the attention of the Caesars in Rome for his wise leadership, and it wasn't long before he was made King of all Israel, a position he held until he died at the age of seventy four.

By the time we are introduced to Herod in the New Testament, he had become something of a monster.

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<sup>2</sup> Antipater ruled the region of Idumea (the desert region south and east of Palestine).

#### *Character*

Toward the end of his life, Herod was known for paranoid brutality. He killed his wives, his counselors and his sons out of fear that they were out to take his throne.

Caesar Augustus, who was actually one of Herod's friends, famously remarked, "*I'd rather be Herod's pig than his son.*"

Some people sweeten with age. Herod grew increasingly dark, brooding and dangerous.

#### *Death and Burial*

##### Time of

We know that Herod died at roughly the same time that Jesus was born. And the manner of Herod's death and burial could not possibly have been more of a stark contrast with the manner of Jesus' birth.

##### Preparations for

Herod's burial site was located about three miles from the cave of Jesus' birth. To this day you can see one from the other.

Jesus was born in an animal shelter on the outskirts of the town of Bethlehem. Herod was buried in a mountain shrine he himself had built called "Herodium."

Herodium was literally a man-made mountain. There is a natural hill close by, but Herodium dwarfs it in size. In fact, Herodium rises higher than any nearby physical feature of the Jericho plains.

Herod's burial mountain was built by the labor of hundreds of foreign forced laborers. They moved massive amounts of earth and rocks to build the mountain.

Placed on Herodium at various points were round towers. There was a steep ascent to the top formed by two hundred steps of stonework.

Within the mountain were apartments for security troops and for storing much of Herod's wealth. Gardens graced the base of the mountain watered by an aqueduct system that piped in water from quite a distance.

When he died, Herod was carried from Jerusalem to Herodium on a golden bier in an extravagant display of pomp and what he had hoped would be mourning over his loss.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus' birth was obscure and quiet. Herod's burial was neither.

The Herod we know at the end of his life as a monster, though, doesn't obscure the fact that he was an enormously successful leader.

Just consider some of his accomplishments.

## Accomplishments

### *Palaces*

He built seven magnificent palaces in and around Jerusalem. Each of these seven palace complexes was larger than any of the palaces the Caesars had built for themselves in Rome.

He reproduced Rome's power and conspicuous consumption throughout the land of Palestine. Herod out-Romed Rome!

### *Cities*

There were two cities built by Herod and by his son, Antipas, located in the Galilean region. Both of them were royal cities.

**Sephoris** was located about three miles north of Nazareth and was the capitol city of Galilee. **Tiberius** is a still active city on the southwest shore of the Sea of Galilee.

What we know from the ruins of Sephoris and from the archaeology of the area around Tiberius is that these cities were fabulous spots, favorite get-aways for the rich and famous, large and impressive.

### *Other works*

Some of Herod's building projects are in evidence to this day. He built amphitheatres, fortifications, aqueducts, hippodromes, shrines, roads, palaces - and his crowning achievement, the rebuilt Solomon Temple in Jerusalem.

As with all men and women who accomplish much in life, Herod was motivated by a vision. His vision was that he might convert the backwoods and backwards Jews of Palestine to an appreciation of the beauty of Greek (and to a lesser extent, Roman) culture.

## Vision

### *A missionary for Greek culture*

He was a very aggressive missionary for Greek art, architecture, literary works, drama, and athletics. He imported into Palestine the best of the Greek world and wanted this little Jewish state to be known throughout the Roman Empire as Greek, through and through.

### *World impact was the goal!*

His interest was not in doing something small or local. He was not parochial or territorial. Herod wanted to change the world, especially the world of Palestine, HIS world, and to make of it a shining beacon for everything Greek.

## Summary:

Bottom line? Herod ruled for thirty four years and was wildly successful in his efforts to establish a kingdom.

It is hard to **NOT** be impressed by Herod. He manipulated power-hungry Rome. He brought together a hodge-podge mix of different groups of people, consolidated power, brought stability to the region he ruled, and brought economic prosperity.

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<sup>3</sup> Knowing that he was now well loved, Herod still wanted to be sure that there was mourning when he died. So, as the time of his death approached, he had the Elders of synagogues throughout Israel be arrested. He then gave orders that when he died, the Elders all be killed, thus guaranteeing mourning. Thankfully, those orders were not carried out.

The influence of Herod and his style was evident all throughout the Palestine in which Jesus was born and grew up. Used with discrimination, there were things Jesus could have learned from Herod!

But before we look at what Jesus did with the Herod model, let's consider one more possible model Jesus might have followed.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, there was a group of people on the scene during Jesus' life who offered a stark contrast to Herod. We know them as the Pharisees.

Unfortunately, the picture we have of the Pharisees from the New Testament is not much more attractive than the picture we have of Herod.

## **Model #2 - PHARISEES**

### **New Testament Picture**

#### *Externalists*

There are many places in the Gospels where we read of Jesus' interactions with the Pharisees. Rarely are these interactions pleasant.

Jesus' constant accusation was that they were hypocrites - claiming something about themselves, but lacking the inward reality of what they claimed. They were *externalists*.

They were externalists AND they were small-minded.

#### *Small-minded*

It had not always been this way, but by the time we meet them in the New Testament, they had for the most part lost a sense of the grandeur of God. They didn't think "KINGDOM OF GOD"!

No, the Pharisees were obsessed with the most minute details of human behavior. They developed rules to order every aspect of daily life. They laid down traditions and customs and regulations that dictated what a person could and could not do in this or that situation.

But it had not always been this way. The pharisaic movement had arisen out of necessity and out of a great passion for God.

### **Development**

#### *The Greek juggernaut*

After Alexander the Great had conquered most of the western world with the sword, Greeks in succeeding generations continued conquering in other ways.

Three hundred years before Jesus, Greece arose as the prominent world culture.

Greece was all about human potential, human intelligence, and the beauty of the human body. The Greeks wanted to convert the world to their civilization. They were aggressive, passionate - and most persuasive. In about a century, the world became Greek.

#### *The Greek onslaught*

The Greeks, though, found one region particularly resistant to their efforts at conversion: the Jewish state of Palestine.

As much as they pushed their agenda, the Jews pushed back. Secularism and humanism was Greece's glory. But the Jews, recently returned to their homeland after the Babylonian captivity, were determined to be all about God.

Even when the Greek "push" became forceful and turned to overt persecution, the Jews stood fast. They resisted secularism, idolatry, paganism, the Greek dramas and athletic contests - the whole thing.

And those who resisted with the greatest intensity, those who separated themselves out as the most passionate about God and His ways became known as "Pharisees".<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The word means "to separate."

*Jewish resistance*

Pharisaism really only caught on with a small percentage of the Jewish population.

But this comparatively small minority had impact all out of proportion to their size. Pharisaism was a grass-roots movement. And the Pharisaic response to thorough and uncompromising Greek evangelism was equally thorough and uncompromising.

It is no exaggeration to say that, from a human perspective, the Pharisees saved Judaism from Greek humanism.

**Priorities***Patriotic*

Over the centuries of their existence as a political and religious force, the Pharisees had become a very important part of the Jewish landscape.

For over three centuries they represented the best of Judaism. They were patriotic, standing against the early Greek onslaught and, later, against Herod and his ways.

*Serious about Scripture*

They were serious about Scripture. They studied their Bibles and memorized it. They knew the word of God, revered it, and taught it with precision.

*Serious about obedience to God*

And they were serious about obedience to God. While Jesus often spoke harshly about them as a group, the individual Pharisees we meet in the New Testament are not portrayed as evil men. Nicodemus had a respectful conversation with Jesus late at night. Joseph of Arimathea loaned his tomb for Jesus' burial. Gamaliel gave wise counsel.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> See Mark 15:43 - Joseph; John 3:1 - Nicodemus; John 7:50 - Nicodemus; John 19:39 - Nicodemus; Acts 5:34 - Gamaliel; Acts 22:3 - Gamaliel.

**Summary:**

You and I today probably don't appreciate what the Pharisees did in rescuing Judaism near enough. And if Jesus had been looking for allies, it would be reasonable to assume that He would look to the Pharisees. They, more than any other group in Israel at the time of Jesus, were loyal to God's ways.

Especially given the hugely important role that they played in the nation's history, the Pharisees had a lot to offer.

The role models we choose define us - and Jesus had two models of how to live, how to behave, and how to conduct himself in the grand impact of Herod and in the serious devotion to truth of the Pharisees.

What did He do with these models?

**Model #3 - JESUS****What Jesus did with Herod and his ways***Herod's works*

Well, Jesus spent His whole life walking Herod's roads. He entered Herod's Temple repeatedly. He was surrounded by the culture and grandiosity of Herod's works. And He never gave it the time of day. He never even acknowledged it. (talk about being relevant...)

*Herod's style*

Right before His eyes, Jesus had the example of a man who did exactly what He was trying to do.

Jesus had come to establish a kingdom - the Kingdom of God. And Herod had successfully established a kingdom. His empire was vast. He worked against formidable odds - and he did it!

Herod had brokered power with the Caesars, acquired massive wealth for himself and for his people, brought in drama and athletic events to shape values, and built splendid examples of the best of the day's architecture.

He brought diverse peoples together - Jews, Romans, Greeks, pagans.

Of course, Herod had no morals, but Jesus could have supplied them. And Herod was not at all interested in God, but Jesus could have made God central while walking in Herod's successful kingdom-building steps.

But Jesus never sought to imitate Herod's ways.

### **What Jesus did with the Pharisees and their ways**

Nor did He follow in the steps of the most serious Jews of His day, the Pharisees. Jesus no more took His lifestyle cues from the Pharisees than He did from the grandiosity of Herod.

While it is true that they saved Judaism from Hellenism, they lost God in the process. Could Jesus have simply adopted pharisaic seriousness and added back in the God component? Perhaps.

But instead of doing that, Jesus plotted His own course and style, becoming the role model that we are called to follow.

As we hear Jesus say, "***Follow Me!***" let's consider the distinctives of His life and ministry.

### **Distinctives of Jesus' Life and Ministry**

#### *Relationally-centered*

#### World-wide vision

First, note that, like Herod, Jesus was all about making world-wide impact!

He was not all about creating small enclaves where people worked out their private righteousness. His eyes were on the world.

He said, "***For God so loved the WORLD***" and "***You are the light of the WORLD***" and "***Preach the Gospel to the whole WORLD***" and "***[the Spirit] will convict the WORLD of sin, righteousness and judgment.***"

Jesus envisioned a world-wide plan to capture the hearts of men and women for His Kingdom. His goals were not parochial, but global.

Jesus intended to usher in God's Kingdom and in speaking of "kingdom" He was using the most comprehensive terms available to Him.

The Kingdom of God includes everything. And Jesus' message was, "***Now that I'm here, the Kingdom of God is here.***"

Let's not miss that Jesus was and is working on a large scale, the largest scale imaginable. If Herod out-Romed Rome in grandiosity, Jesus out-Heroded Herod!

But, once we move beyond the shared goal of world-wide impact, it is unmistakable that Jesus' style differed from Herod's as night differs from day.

#### The settings He chose

#### PLACES OF COMMUNITY

Herod gave His attention to the big and impressive. The cities he built or that were built in his name were the big ones. Tiberius and Sepphoris.

It is fascinating to me that neither of these cities is mentioned in the New Testament.

Tiberius was located on the southwest shore of the Sea of Galilee, and Sepphoris was located about five miles north of Nazareth (and about as far south of Cana). As far as we know, Jesus never traveled to these cities, never ministered there, never preached there.

Instead, having been raised in the small city of Nazareth, He set up His base of operations in the even smaller village of Capernaum.

Capernaum wasn't exactly "out of the way," as it was located near a major trade route (that actually ran through Sephoris), but Capernaum was completely unimportant, politically.<sup>6</sup>

And in choosing Capernaum Jesus chose a setting in which everyone would have known everyone else. It was a true community.

Both Sephoris and Tiberius were within sight of the cities Jesus visited and lived in. He knew all about them. He probably heard the cheers from the coliseums on quiet nights and knew when there were Greek tragedies playing in the theatres.

But He never paid them any mind.

He lived in Capernaum, an agricultural village. But the people didn't live out in the country. They all lived in the village in houses that were joined together. We refer to these cobbled together houses as "insula."

In addition to choosing a place for working out His ministry and life that was centered around relationship, Jesus chose a place that was centered on God.

#### PLACES OF WORSHIP

The two architecturally prominent realities in Capernaum were the insula (everybody knew everybody) and the synagogue (everybody worshiped together).

The buildings Herod built were massive and impersonal and secular. The buildings Jesus chose to frequent were personal and were all about God.

And here is the important thing. Jesus didn't work out His life and ministry in the intensely personal and God-centered setting of Capernaum because He didn't know any better, or because that was the only context He knew.

He chose to be in Capernaum because to be in a place where relationships and corporate worship are everything better fulfilled the vision of the kingdom He was ushering in.

For another contrast to Herod, consider the people Jesus chose to associate with.

#### THE PEOPLE HE CHOSE

Herod hobnobbed with the rich and famous. He curried favor with Rome, used people for his own benefit and was concerned to impress the impressive people.

Jesus chose to work on the margins of society. He gave particular attention to the poor, the weak, the disturbed, the unimportant, and the powerless.

These were the people who would populate the kingdom over which He would rule.

#### Summary:

Instead of inviting people into a world of bigness and grandiosity, Jesus invited people to follow Him into a web of personal relationships and into a world where people worship God together.

If we can take the place Jesus chose as His center of operations as a clue, we can say this: Anyone interested in following Jesus can't avoid people and can't avoid worshipping God with people.

And there is another distinctive of Jesus' life that I want to be sure that we observe this morning. I want us to think together about the way Jesus used language.

#### *Use of language (stories)*

If His choice of place and people set Him most apart from Herod, His use of language is what set Him most apart from the Pharisees.

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<sup>6</sup> He spent lots of time in the three towns that together make up what is referred to as "the evangelical triangle" - Capernaum, Bethsaida, Chorazim, all located near the north shore of the Sea of Galilee.

Jesus was a tremendous teacher, a fact attested to by His audiences. But He taught very differently from the Pharisees. He told stories. We call these stories parables.

The Pharisees didn't tell stories.

They were famous for precision in language. They loved definitions. Their language was controlled and it was impersonal.

For the Pharisee, language was a serious thing. They used it to declare truth, they used it colorlessly, and they used it impersonally. Stories were for children. They had more important things to do than to tell stories.

Jesus? He told stories. He knew that stories are just as effective at communicating truth as propositions. But stories do something that stark propositions can never do.

If the storyteller is good - and Jesus was a GREAT storyteller - he will draw our attention in the telling of the story to something important about life and God.

A story well told helps us live better. It helps us enjoy a pleasure more deeply, take advantage of an opportunity, learn caution of a previously unforeseen danger, value a person we hadn't ever seen as important.

One day, Jesus told a man that the most important commandment from God was to love the Lord with heart, soul, mind, and strength and your neighbor like yourself. He gave propositional truth.

The man responded, Pharisee-like, by asking Jesus to define "*neighbor*."

Jesus' response to that question was to tell a story, the story we know as The Good Samaritan. And that story not only defined "neighbor" (anyone you see who has a need you can meet), it also moves us to say, "I want to be a good neighbor!"

Stories draw people together and the point of telling a story is relational.<sup>7</sup>

The contrast between the way Jesus and the Pharisees used language could not have been starker.

### Conclusion:

This morning I have wanted to paint a picture of two different ways of approaching life, both of them available to Jesus, and both available to us. They were both prominent in the first century, and are equally prominent in the twenty-first.

If you are a person impressed with the grand and glorious Herod-style of living and became a Christian and hear Jesus say, "***Follow Me***" you will be most struck by His insistence on personal relationships. You will hear Jesus call you into a world of names and personal encounters and worship with friends.

If, on the other hand, you are a person impressed with the Pharisee style of living and hear Jesus say, "***Follow Me***" you will be most struck by His use of language. You will hear His call to "***Follow***" as a call to relate to others in a way that requires participation through conversation.

What is impossible to miss is that Jesus' whole life was lived in the context of a web of personal relationships. And so to "follow the Leader" will involve something other than impersonal grandiosity and something more than rules and formulas. It will mean that we immerse ourselves in community.

There is no meaningful following of Jesus that does not involve community.

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<sup>7</sup> Jesus also used metaphor, a sort of mini-parable. "***I am the door***" and "***You are salt***" and, of Herod's son, "***that fox***." The metaphor (which is actually a lie; I am NOT salt) is sprinkled throughout the Bible. And there is a reason for that. The metaphor is a very imprecise way of speaking. It forces reflection and participation. I have to think about a metaphor and even discuss it if I am going to get it. The metaphor and the parable are alike in that they are compressed stories. Like story, metaphor provides a relational way of using language.