

## “Danger in Bethlehem”

Matthew 2.1-23

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Christmas I

Walt has read the part of the story that most of us are very familiar with: wise men – “magi” – come from the east to Jerusalem, in search of the newborn king of the Jews, whose star they saw and followed. It’s the basis for the classic hymn “We Three Kings of Orient Are,” though in the Bible there’s no indication that they were actually kings, or that there were three of them. King Herod sends them to Bethlehem, because of that prophecy in the Old Testament book of Micah: the great ruler, the shepherd of Israel, is to come from Bethlehem. The star also points the way to Bethlehem, and when the magi see the star over the place where the child lies, they are filled with joy, and they bow down and honor him, presenting him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The story reminds us about how the coming of Christ into the world brings hope to people in lands far away, for Christ came not just to save Israel, but the whole world, and it continues to inspire us every Christmas as we re-tell the story and sing the song one more time.

But there is an undercurrent to the story, a dangerous undercurrent, that the song makes no mention of, and which we tend to skip over in our reading of the story on Christmas Eve. *King Herod wants to kill the child.* When he sends the magi to Bethlehem, he sends them with instructions: “When you’ve found the child, report to me so that I too may go and honor him.”

Don’t believe for a moment that King Herod wants to *honor* the baby Jesus. No – *he wants that baby dead.* His motives are revealed clearly in verse 16: “He sent soldiers to kill all the children in Bethlehem and in all the surrounding territory who were two years old and younger.” Thankfully, Matthew spares us the details. All we are told is that this, too, fulfills a prophecy: “A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and much grieving. Rachel weeping for her children, and she did not want to be comforted, because they were no more.” (Matthew 2.18, quoting Jeremiah 31.15).

You can imagine the carnage. The terror. The Roman soldiers, beating down doors of houses in Bethlehem, the ancient “house of bread” where a thousand years earlier Ruth the Moabite had found hospitality and redemption. Now, the “house of bread” has become a charnel house – babies ripped from their mothers arms and slaughtered before them. You can feel the emotions. Weeping, anguish, grieving, mourning. Anger and rage and hate. Maybe some valiant attempts on the part of some

mothers and fathers to save their beloved son or daughter, maybe some mothers or fathers who ended up dead as well. “Rachel weeping for her children.”

The incident, known now as the “slaughter of the innocents,” is only recorded in the gospel of Matthew. No other New Testament writings make any mention of the incident, nor does any historical source outside the Bible. But it is consistent with the type of brutality that Herod “the Great” was capable of. We know from the Jewish historian Josephus that Herod murdered three of his sons, his mother-in-law, and his own wife. He was a puppet king for the Roman empire, even granted the title “King of Judea” by the Roman Senate. He imposed heavy taxes on the Jewish people to support his massive building projects, he prohibited protests, he removed political opponents by force. He felt it necessary to retain a personal bodyguard comprised of *two thousand* soldiers. The incident that Matthew describes in Bethlehem is mentioned nowhere else, but it is *entirely* in keeping with everything we know about Herod. It is entirely plausible that he could – and *would* – have issued an order to kill babies, if he perceived a threat to his rule ... which, according to Matthew, he did.

You have to understand that to first-century Jews, the word “Christ” or “Messiah” was a *political* term. They envisioned a mighty ruler who would come, kick the Romans out of Judea and Galilee, and restore Israel to the greatness it once had experienced under David and Solomon, a millennium earlier, when it was a force to be reckoned with. So when the magi arrived in Jerusalem in search of “the Messiah,” “the Christ,” whose star they had seen at its rising, what that meant was that a new King had been born who had the power to unseat *any* political power – even Herod the Great. So, as far as Herod was concerned, the baby had to die.

Thankfully, the angels intervened. One warns the magi in a dream not to return to Herod. One appears to Joseph in a dream, advising him to flee with Mary and baby Jesus all the way to Egypt, for the baby’s life is at risk *anywhere* in Judea if Herod finds him. Later, an angel appears again to Joseph in a dream, telling him that Herod has died and it is safe to head towards home, and an angel appears to him yet one more time, advising him not to return to Judea (in the south) but instead to make a new home in Galilee (in the north), for one of Herod’s sons is now ruling the region of Judea. That makes *four* visits of angels in people’s dreams, in this one chapter. Thank God the magi and Joseph were all listening and receptive to the messages from the angels – for this story could have had a very different ending.

I try to imagine what this must have felt like to Mary. “Hey honey, wake up,” Joseph says to her in the middle of the night. “We’ve got to get out of here, *now*.” “What? What are you talking about?” “The baby’s in danger. *We’re* in danger. Roman soldiers are coming to kill all the babies in Bethlehem.” “What do you mean? How do you know this?” “Trust me, honey. I *know*.” “Have you seen them?” “No. Come on, grab your bag, we’ve got to *go*!” “But I don’t understand. How do you *know*?” “The same way you knew you were going to have a baby. The same way you knew just *who* this baby is going to be. Listen, Mary, there are angels looking out for us, for this child. Herod wants him dead. We’ve got to get out of here, *now!*”

And so they fled. They left their home, with danger hot on their heels, probably taking only with them the bare necessities for their journey. Mary undoubtedly wondered why they had to go all the

way to Egypt. Why couldn't they have gone to Jericho, or Emmaus, or Hebron, or any of several dozen other cities or towns that would have been a *lot* closer? Why a whole different *country*?

Because sometimes, the danger is so great, you have to leave the land that you love, and make a new home somewhere completely different. Like the Jews who escaped from Germany in the 1930s. Like the Vietnamese boat people in the 1970s. Like the Syrian refugees, right now.

Imagine what would have happened if Joseph and Mary had arrived at the border of Egypt, to find it closed. "Sorry," says the security detail at the border checkpoint. "This country doesn't have room for you." "But they're trying to *kill* us!" Joseph exclaims. "Not my problem," says the guard. "Find somewhere else to go." Joseph and Mary would have looked at each other, with tears and fear ... and who knows what would have happened to that baby.

But, thankfully, the border wasn't closed. Joseph and Mary were able to live peaceably in Egypt, for as long as they needed, until God told them it was time to head back home.

The ironic part of the story is that Herod was right. That baby *did* represent a threat to his power. No, he was not going to sit on a throne in a palace in Jerusalem, the way Herod did. But he would take his place on a throne, a royal throne, sitting at the right hand of God the Father Almighty in heavenly glory, "from whence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead," as the Apostles' Creed puts it. "He is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead," says Peter in Acts 10.42. "We must all appear before Christ in court so that each person can be paid back for the things that were done while in the body, whether they were good or bad," says Paul in 2 Corinthians 5.10. "God has set a day when he intends to judge the world justly by a man he has appointed," says Paul in Acts 17.31. "The Father gives the Son authority to judge," says Jesus in John 5.27. The New Testament bears consistent witness to this truth: *Jesus Christ is coming to judge the living and the dead.*

Herod, that means *you*. *You* will be judged by Jesus Christ – that baby you are trying to kill.

Oh, there's danger in Bethlehem, all right. There's danger for all who act unjustly. Danger for all who abuse their power. Danger for all who murder, steal, cheat, lie, dishonor God or their fellow human being. Danger for all of *us*, who all too easily fall prey to sin's lure.

But it's *holy* danger. It's *good* danger. It's *just* danger. It's the kind of danger that ought to strike *fear* into the hearts of all those who, throughout history, have caused harm to others. It's the kind of danger that ought to be striking fear into the hearts of all tyrants, all terrorists, all those whose violent actions force people to leave their homeland in search of safer ground elsewhere. See, this world has a *Judge*. A supreme power, enthroned in the heavens, who holds *all* people accountable for their actions, who will not let violence and injustice and oppression and tyranny win in the end.

That's good news. That's *holy* news. That's one of the reasons why that baby came ... and why the angels sent message after message to make sure that the baby would stay *safe*, so he could complete his mission on earth and take up that throne in heaven that was fit for him, and him alone.

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