"The Holy Innocents"

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Matthew 2:13-23

Mason, Michigan

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Second Sunday of Christmas

Two days from now is Epiphany, the traditional day in the church calendar when we remember the visit of the wise men to baby Jesus. Most of you are familiar with that story, how magi from the east follow a star to visit baby Jesus and bring him very special gifts. That is generally considered to be the end of the Christmas story, the last important event that we remember in scripture and song every Christmas season. But there's another event that Matthew records, that comes right on the heels of the visit of the wise men: King Herod's brutal attempt to *kill* baby Jesus. This story is violent, tragic, and sad; it results in the deaths of many children. Mary and Joseph flee for their lives, becoming political refugees, taking baby Jesus out of the country of his birth to the land of Egypt, until it is safe for them to return to their homeland. This story is less familiar to many people. There are a lot of questions about whether this sequence of events actually happened, because we have a *lot* of information from other sources about Herod's reign and the many atrocities he committed, but nobody other than Matthew mentions these events. Matthew included this story in his Gospel for a reason. There's a *meaning* here, a *message* that this story conveys, a theological *truth* ready for us to explore. The question is, what is it?

Matthew begins: "After [the magi] had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream." This is the second time Joseph has had an important dream involving an angel. The first, of course, was when the angel told him not to break his engagement with Mary, when he discovered she was pregnant. This second dream is almost as important as the first. This time, the angel instructs Joseph: "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." Egypt was (and still is) just to the south and east of Israel. The Egyptian border wasn't far away – only about 50 miles from Bethlehem, where Mary, Joseph, and Jesus were. They could get there within a few days. But why? Why would the infant Savior of the World need to be whisked away to a foreign country? Because a petty, tyrannical king was afraid of him, that's why.

Herod "the Great," as he is called, came to power because his father had good relations with Julius Caesar, the Roman general who became the dictator of Rome half a century before Jesus was born. Julius Caesar gave Herod's father control over all the land we now call Israel. Herod's father then made Herod the governor of Galilee. He expanded his power in the midst of a great deal of political conflict. Later, the Roman Senate gave him the title "King of the Jews," and in the year 37 BC Herod decisively defeated the remaining Jewish opposition and began ruling the entire land from the city of Jerusalem. He built a royal palace there, along with a Roman theater (for entertainment), a Roman amphitheater (for government), Roman aqueducts (for public health), and a Roman hippodrome (for horse races). He also renovated and greatly expanded the Jewish temple. Outside of Jerusalem, he built major ports along the Mediterranean coast, and many fortresses and palaces in other parts of the land. His building

projects were legendary, and the remains of many of them still stand today. His personal life, on the other hand, was a mess. He had at least nine wives, nine sons, and five daughters. There was constant drama in the royal family: jealousy, plotting, battles for succession, and so on. Herod ordered the execution of one of his wives, one of his mothers-in-law, one of his brothers-in-law, and three of his sons. Basically, he was extremely paranoid, and very cruel, and he routinely put to death anyone whom he perceived as a threat to his power, including high priests, Pharisees, and other Jewish leaders.

So it would have been entirely in character for Herod to concoct a plot to kill the newborn baby Jesus, if he perceived him as a threat. This is exactly what Matthew says happened. When the wise men arrived in Jerusalem looking for Jesus, Herod "was frightened." He learned from his advisors that the scriptures predicted the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. So Herod sent the wise men to Bethlehem, telling them, "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." But that was a blatant lie; he didn't want to bow down to the Messiah; he wanted to *kill* the Messiah. He waits in Jerusalem for the wise men to return to him, telling him *specifically* where the child is, so that he can send his troops to *kill* him.

But the wise men don't return to Jerusalem. "Having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road." Herod realizes: "he had been tricked by the magi." "He was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the magi." This suggests some time has passed since Jesus was born. Herod wants to *make sure* that the Messiah ends up dead, so he orders his men to kill "all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under."

Numerous artists over the centuries have depicted the horror of this moment. Giotto, 1304-1306. Hans Pleydenwurff, c. 1460. Matteo di Giovanni, 1488. Guido Reni, 1611. Peter Paul Rubens, 1611-1612. Léon Cognie, 1824. And *many* more. Imagine the terror of young moms valiantly trying to protect their beloved babes from an army of men who have been ordered by a tyrannical king to *kill* them.

How many children would that have been? One legend says there were 14,000. Another legend says there were 64,000. Still another says there were 144,000! That number comes from a passage in the Book of Revelation: "I looked, and there was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion! And with him were one hundred forty-four thousand who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads.... It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins; these follow the Lamb wherever he goes.... In their mouth no lie was found; they are blameless." (Revelation 14:1-5) All those estimates are incredibly unrealistic. There were only about a thousand people living in and around Bethlehem when Jesus was born. Scholars think there couldn't have been more than about 20 babies killed. Still ... that's twenty more deaths than were justified. We call these babes "the Holy Innocents." They are the first martyrs of the church – the first people who died for the cause of Jesus Christ.

But Joseph and Mary and baby Jesus escaped, fleeing to Egypt. There are a lot of legends about what happened there. The renowned biblical scholar Raymond Brown summarized some of them.[1] A Christian book from the middle ages tells that "many miracles worked in their favor: they were protected from dragons, reverenced by lions and leopards who wagged their tails in homage,

[1] Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke*, new updated edition (Doubleday, 1993), pp. 203-204.

marvelously fed by palm trees that bent down before them." Some stories say that "Jesus was responsible for the growth of basalm trees or palm trees." Others say that the holy family went sailing hundreds of miles up and down the Nile River. One legend says that in one city "the pagan idols of the city temple fell to the ground as the holy family passed through." Another says that in one place "they were set upon by two robbers who attempted to plunder them, but one repented when he saw Mary's tears—these were the same two robbers who were to be crucified with Jesus on Calvary, and the one who repented was the Good Thief." There is no end to Christian speculation, imagination, and creativity!

Eventually, Joseph has a third dream, informing him that Herod has died. He died in 4 BC, four years "before Christ." That seems odd, right, because Jesus was already born?!? Our calendar was created by a sixth-century monk who did his best to calculate the year Jesus was born, but we now know that he was at least four years off. This really should the "the year of our Lord 2030," not 2026!

Joseph and Mary head back to their homeland, but not to Bethlehem. "When [Joseph] heard that Archelaus was ruling Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream" – Joseph's *fourth* dream! – "he went away to the district of Galilee. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth." Jesus grows up, and comes to be known as "Jesus of Nazareth."

Let's go back to the question I asked earlier. What is Matthew's message? I think there are two. First: Matthew wants us to know that Jesus's whole life was anticipated by the Hebrew prophets. In the space of eleven verses, he quotes or refers to four different passages from the Hebrew scriptures. Mary and Joseph fleeing to Egypt – Matthew connects that with Hosea 11:1: "Out of Egypt I have called my son." Herod killing all the children in and around Bethlehem – Matthew links that with Jeremiah 31:15: "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.'" "Ramah" was a city in the vicinity of Bethlehem; and Rachel, one of the wives of the biblical patriarch Jacob, and thus the ancestral mother of many Jews, was buried near Bethlehem, as told in the book of Genesis. Finally, Mary and Joseph settling in Nazareth and raising Jesus there – Matthew associates that with Isaiah 11:1 and Isaiah 4:3: "He will be called a Nazarene.'" Matthew was a man who knew his Bible very, *very* well, and he connects the dots between some fairly obscure passages in the Hebrew scriptures with the life of Jesus, to make the point: *all of this was foretold*. He doesn't just do this here; there are dozens and dozens of verses from the Hebrew scriptures that he quotes or refers to throughout the twenty-eight chapters of his Gospel. We'll be spending a lot of time with Matthew this year; pay attention and you'll hear a lot of those.

Second: Matthew wants to make it abundantly clear that *evil is real* and that it is *fundamentally opposed to Jesus*. In this case, evil takes the form of a cruel, paranoid, vindictive, violent tyrant. Herod's reign was a reign of terror for many people. He used and abused his power to get whatever he wanted, and to knock all of his opponents or perceived opponents out of his way. The Roman Senate had named Herod "King of the Jews," but here is a baby who *rightfully* wears that title, and Herod will stop at nothing to destroy him. If innocent people are killed, so what? He didn't care. This is what tyrants do. Evil is real, and it (rightly) perceives Jesus as a threat, and so it tries to take Jesus out. But it fails. Jesus escapes. Herod dies. Yet evil will come for Jesus again. It will *keep* coming, until it succeeds in getting Jesus executed. But the good news of the Gospel is that evil can *never* eliminate Jesus. Jesus escaped evil's clutches as a baby, and he will do so again when he dies. But that's a story for Easter....