

Christmas Fear

sermon digest

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Matthew 2:1-11

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British Prime Minister David Cameron's New Year's Eve message was on the threat of terrorism. Earlier in the week nine British men of Bangladesh origin were arrested for plotting terrorist attacks on London targets.

New Year's Day, Pope Benedict XVI issued a condemnation of the attack on a Coptic church in Egypt. Twenty-one people were killed and eighty injured probably by a suicide bombing as they emerged from the church following a New Year's Day Mass.

Just a month ago, at a Christmas tree lighting ceremony in Portland, Oregon, a nineteen-year-old Somali-born US citizen was arrested for attempting to set off a fake car bomb planted by the FBI. The latest twist in an otherwise twisted form of violence is internal recruitment of citizens.

Since the year 2000, a report of the State Department to Congress on global terrorism has become an annual event. Terrorist acts have become so common in our world that the year-end reports have begun to sound like business as usual. When historians sum up the character of our age, will this be known as the age of terror? Fear is the engine that powers terrorism, yet fear is natural—a basic response to threat that we share with other animals. Survival depends on a healthy understanding of danger, but terrorists have learned that manipulating this natural emotion can be a powerful weapon for inciting revolution and challenging the ruling powers of this world. Terrorism is as ancient as war itself. In fact, rule by terror has long been the tactic of choice of the worst tyrants in world history.

State terrorism is violence intended to instill public fear through the auspices of government. The very name Herod was enough to send cold chills up the spine of anyone living in Judea in the early first century. In many ways worse than the Romans, Herod was a Jew, appointed by Rome to keep the Jews under control. He came from a wealthy family, the son of Antipater, an affluent man from Idumea, and Cyprus, the daughter of an Arabian sheik. Like many puppet kings of the time, he was assigned authority over a Roman territory to give the impression of self-rule, but no one really doubted that he served at the pleasure and for the benefit of the hated Romans and that his ruthless intolerance of rivals to his throne was directly connected to his overinflated ego and personal insecurity.

Herod assumed power through political manipulation of a civil war. He convinced Rome that he could pacify the territory. Although public conflict was an intolerable luxury quick to bring down Roman military might, Rome had little concern for how much blood was shed in the process of pacification. The Roman peace (*pax Romana*) was a reign of terror. In his first years of power Herod disposed of his wife and mother-in-law and was said to have drowned his brother-in-law with his own hands. With ten wives he produced fifteen children, ten of whom were sons and possible successors to his throne.

Although no historical record of the slaughter of innocents exists outside of Matthew, the account of the slaughter of children in Bethlehem is consistent with historical accounts of Herod's reign. This king had no scruples about killing his own children whom he perceived to be a threat to his power. The Romans joked, "Better to be Herod's pig(*hus*) than his son(*huios*).” The paranoid regent, known for slaughtering children, including his own, gained a formidable reputation for his ruthlessness even among the ruthless Romans. "Herod the Great" he was called, distinguishing him in history from the later Herods who would continue the reign of terror over Palestine. In spite of his monumental architectural accomplishments, including the most magnificent Temple ever constructed in Jerusalem, Herod's greatness was more about destruction than construction. Herod was a terrorist, albeit a state terrorist. He had mastered the fine art of *pax Romana*, Roman control of the population with his unpredictable acts of insane violence.

With all of the attention drawn to condemning modern revolutionary religious fanatics like Al-Qaeda, we should not ignore state terrorism. The terrorist acts of Israel against Palestinians, of the British against the Irish, and of people in high places in our own government who advocate torture in response to the threat of terrorism are examples of terrorism under the umbrella of government. Official, authorized, legal infliction of violence is just as inhumane and repulsive as the kind done in

the name of religion or revolution. Terrorism has been called the poor man's atomic bomb. The quip, "one man's terrorists is another's freedom fighter," does not justify cruelty or attacks on the innocent no matter what the source or the target.

Terrorism is the child of fear. We have seen the same pattern repeated in the social sins of our age. Sexually abused children often become sexual abusers of children. People who grow up in violent homes produce the very domestic violence they learned to fear as children. Statistical evidence demonstrates that capital punishment does not deter capital crimes and may well justify violent behavior in the criminal mind. We cannot create peace with war any more than we can force love through violence.

Matthew may well be on to something important for all of us to learn in this age of terrorism. Terrorism is the child of fear. When Herod learned from the Magi of the baby "born to be king," "he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him." Matthew does not use the common word for fear from which we get the English word *phobia*; so the RSV translates, "He was troubled." Literally, he was deeply disturbed. The word-choice may be for rhetorical variety, but I suspect that the Evangelist was making a legitimate distinction. Herod's terror was not of the same variety that shows up elsewhere in the Bible.

This was not the same fear reported throughout the birth narratives—not the fear exhibited by Zechariah, Mary, and Joseph in response to a visitation of the angel of God or of the shepherds in the field in response to the heavenly hosts. The fear of God encouraged and even commanded in Hebrew history is a response of awe to an encounter with the Almighty; it is affirmed in the "Magnificat": "His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation." This is the fear of reverence, the awe inspired in worship of the ultimate power of the universe. In his classic work on the experience of God, *The Idea of the Holy*, Rudolf Otto described the human encounter with the Holy as *mysterium tremendum*, "the element of awefulness" (p. 12ff). Encounter with the holiness of God does not lead to acts of cruelty and violence. The fear of God leads to worship of God and to love of neighbor, the very opposite of the fear that gripped the heart of Herod.

Matthew records that the terrorist king was terrified. Herod, the one history has identified as "the Great," was scared by a child. What kind of fear is this? It is the fear that leads to insane acts of lashing out at shadows. Matthew fully intends for you to see in the shadows an earlier epoch in which a terrified Pharaoh observed the Hebrew population growth and decided on a final solution: Kill the male babies; stop the expansion of the family through a final form of birth control, the elimination of fathers. It was not so different from the mind of Adolf Hitler reacting in fear to the presence of the Jewish people in Germany and formulating the dread "final solution."

Matthew is on to something here. All of Herod's insane acts of violence against his enemies, against his friends, against his own family, against his own children were not so much acts in the positive sense of a creative moment of action. They were not acts so much as reacts. Herod was reacting to the dark terror which lived in his soul. Terrorism is the child of terror.

Stranger than Herod's anxiety about the birth of a child was the inclusion of all Jerusalem with him. You would think that all Jerusalem would have been ignorant of the birth of Jesus; and, had they known, they would have been celebrating in the streets rather than joining the disturbed mind of their hated ruler. Eugene Boring (*The New Interpreter's Bible*) sees the inclusion of Jerusalem as the same kind of fear that would later be identified with the crucifixion of the Christ. Fear permeates both the beginning and the end of the Gospel story. Fear accompanies the entrance of Jesus into this world and his exit through death and resurrection.

Above all else, terrorists fear peace. If only Herod could have known and understood, if Pilate could have seen the whole picture instead of his little window of threat from one who was different, if the Chief Priest and the Sanhedren could have put their fear of Jesus into perspective with the whole of Hebrew history, if the people of Jerusalem could have grasped the meaning of Messiah, if. . .if. . .if! Isaiah seems to have been inclined to perceive the big picture. He would be called the Prince of Peace and of his Kingdom there would be no end.

But peace on earth means change. Someone, some Herod, has to give over authority to a higher power. Someone, some billionaire has to share the accumulated wealth of an empire with the poorest

of the poor. Someone, some religious establishment, has to risk the freedom of religion on the freedom of conscience and to allow the truth to emerge through the course of nature. Just as terror is born of fear, peace is born of love.