

Christmas Shadows

Jeremiah 31:15-20; Matthews 2:13-18

sermon digest

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This is the season of light. Christmas trees, shopping centers and stores seem to echo John's message that in Christ the light of God was coming into the world. But there is a dark side to the message. Light always casts shadows. Especially in Matthew's version of the birth of Christ we have to deal with Christmas shadows. Margaret Guider (*Christian Reflection: Children*, p. 20) writes of the "Shadow of the Manger," finding a connection between the passion of Christ in the crucifixion with the dark message behind the birth of Jesus.

The common mental picture of Christmas blends the stories of Matthew and Luke as if each were written to supplement the other. Typically the star of Bethlehem and the Magi from Matthew are found together with the angels, shepherds, and manger from Luke, but no one sees a Christmas creche that portrays the slaughter of babies in Bethlehem. We may blend the stories, but we leave off the unpleasant pictures of Matthew's vision.

Actually the Gospels present two distinct stories, not one. In Matthew, Herod is the hostile King of Judea responsible for the slaughter of children in Bethlehem, and Bethlehem is the home of Mary and Joseph. After the birth of Jesus, the holy family escapes the slaughter of babies in Bethlehem by escape to Egypt where they stay until Herod's death. Then they return to a new home in Nazareth.

In Luke, Mary and Joseph reside in Nazareth not Bethlehem. By order of Augustus, they travel to Bethlehem where Jesus is born in a stable. The special revelation is to shepherds in the field, not foreign diplomats. On the baby's eighth day, they do not go to Egypt but to Jerusalem to the Temple for circumcision of the child and Mary's rite of purification. Then they return their home to Nazareth.

In the twelve days of Christmas, December 28th is Holy Innocents Day; the tradition is more likely to be acknowledged in Catholic, Lutheran, or Episcopal churches than in evangelical congregations. The focus is on the slaughter of the children of Bethlehem, but it is hardly a day we could call a celebration. We have a strong tendency to ignore both in public worship and in conversation with our children Matthew's story of Herod's slaughter of babies, and we have a tendency to sigh in relief to encounter the information that no corroboration of Herod's horrible act of killing babies can be found in any other source than Matthew. Thus, with relief, most scholars believe that the story lacks sufficient historical support to have been factual. More conservative interpreters defend the historical accuracy of Matthew's story, noting that Herod was notorious for such horrible deeds. He is reported to have killed two of his own sons around the time of Jesus' birth. As Herod was dying, he ordered the execution of a third son and decreed one execution in every household to guarantee appropriate mourning for his death. Caesar Augustus was said to have punned, "It is better to be Herod's pig (*hus*) than his son (*huios*)." After Herod's death, the mass killing was ignored, but it may have influenced Matthew's story.

In this year of natural disaster, storms, earthquakes, and tsunamis; this year of drug wars and political revolution: does the slaughter of innocents recorded in Matthew speak to any reality of our time?

Innocents are common victims of the insane violence in our world. Robert Young (*Journal for Preachers*, Advent, 2003, p. 12) refers to "Matthew's Christmas Allegory," intended to parallel events in the life of Moses. The Gospel was written for a Jewish audience familiar with Jewish history. The slaughter of the innocents in Bethlehem recalls the story of baby Moses and his escape the slaughter of Hebrew boys by order of Pharaoh. Matthew also refers poetically to Rachel's weeping. Rachel was Jacob's wife who died in childbirth and was buried nearby. Matthew imagines Rachel weeping for her children: "she refused to be consoled because they are no more." Rachel became a symbol of the suffering innocents. Ramah was the traditional location of her burial and the gathering of Jews for exportation in the Babylonian Captivity. In Jeremiah, Rachel wept for the descendants of her children taken into exile. Later tradition also located Ramah as a resting place for the holy family on the way to Egypt.

The number killed in Bethlehem was obviously exaggerated as it was repeated in history. The Greek Liturgy refers to the death of 14,000 boys. The Syrian Church reported 64,000 deaths, and medieval theologians extended the number to apocalyptic heavenly population, 144,000. Bethlehem was a small village of about 1,000 residents containing perhaps twenty children under age two. Some argue that the small number of affected families, maybe twenty, would not have attracted the attention of historians like Josephus in a violent Roman Empire. The death of twenty children may have been significant only for the families, but the story which was passed on to Matthew became part of the Christmas tradition.

From the beginning of the Iraq war, the News Hour on PBS has ended every broadcast with silence and pictures of soldiers killed in battle. Viewing the pictures of healthy, mostly young men and women is haunting. I see behind the smiling faces families in grief that can only be imagined as the slides change from soldier to soldier. Behind every picture lie deeply wounded souls who will be scarred for the rest of their lives. But every time I encounter this spectacle, I am reminded that we tend to view only the surface effect of war—the soldiers. Beyond the picture of every soldier are hundreds of innocent civilians, the elderly and children who are the casualties of war that they did not choose nor did they cause.

Elie Wiesel, (*Night* P. 43) , tells about the horrors of the Holocaust. He was fifteen when he arrived at Auschwitz and witnessed the shocking horror of the Nazi death camp. One of the seasoned prisoners told the newcomers, “Poor devils, you are going to the crematory.” Then Elie saw with his own eyes the bodies of babies being tossed into the flames. He wrote, “Never shall I forget the little faces of the children whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky. Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever.” We are reminded again of the larger than facts reality of Matthew’s story.

In an interview with biographers, Timothy McVeigh expressed regret for parking his truck bomb so near the daycare center in the 1995 destruction of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. His concern for the death of nineteen children focused on the public relations nightmare that distracted attention from his anti-government message. He was reported to have used the military euphemism, “collateral damage,” as an explanation of suffering of the innocents.

The practice of abandoning newborn babies to death by exposure in Roman society has often been cited as evidence of the inhumanity of that culture. A letter from a Roman soldier instructing his pregnant wife to expose a girl or to keep a boy seems to be beneath the moral level of an animal. We could wish that the reality were a remnant from ancient history in primitive times that precede modern civil behavior, but not so. The Nazi attempt to exterminate the Jewish population from Europe was the classic modern example of the war on children. More than a million children under sixteen were estimated to have died during Hitler’s program of extermination. Even death by hunger and disease could not be called natural cause. They were deliberately, cruelly exterminated like vermin.

The Jewish persecution led in 1948 to the adoption by the United Nations of the “Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.” The war on children has continued for the past sixty years. Most recently the “convention” has addressed crimes in Bosnia, where the policy of extermination was called “ethnic cleansing.” Butchering of children along with their mothers has also been documented in African wars in Rwanda, the Sudan, and Dafur.

The protection of children is our responsibility. It belongs not only to governments, police departments, and parents. The protection of children belongs to all of us. I find an irony in the scholarly opinion that no more than twenty children under two years of age could have been living in Bethlehem at the birth of Jesus. Yet, I have not heard anyone speak in dismissal of the slaughter of twenty children in Newtown, Connecticut. Not only the nation, the whole world was caught up in the sense of tragedy and in compassion for the affected families. Given the season of the year, church leaders have repeatedly turned to the story in Matthew of Herod’s insane slaughter of innocents in Bethlehem.

Madeleine L’Engle was an American writer best known for her novel *A Wrinkle in Time*. She was also a poet and a serious Christian with a critical eye for some Christian traditions in need of an inquisition. In her book on the seasons of the Christian year, *The Irrational Season*, L’Engle admits to having no seminary training or formal education in biblical interpretation, but she nevertheless finds cause to raise questions about the birth of Jesus. In her poem “The Risk of Birth” L’Engle raised a question that new parents often ask:

This is no time for a child to be born,
With the earth betrayed by war and hate
And a comet slashing the sky to warn
That time runs out and the sun burns late.

That was no time for a child to be born,
In a land in the crushing grip of Rome;
Honor and truth were trampled by scorn-
Yet here did the Savior make his home.

When is the time for love to be born?
The inn is full on the planet earth,
And by a comet the sky is torn-
Yet Love still takes the risk of birth.

Particularly Christmas comes into scrutiny: “This is the irrational season / When love blooms bright and wild / Had Mary been filled with reason / There’d have been no room for the child.”

I suspect that biblical scholars are right about questioning the historical facts in Matthew's Gospel, but I also suspect that a larger picture may have been in sight for Matthew than the birth of Jesus. Herod's slaughter may not have happened exactly as Matthew reports. I certainly hope not. But the suffering of innocents in an insane world transcends the history of the moment to address the experience of the ages. And this Christmas we are particularly reminded that we have a responsibility to protect our children. The message seems to be clear but remains to be addressed politically, does anyone need to own an assault rifle?

Maybe, like Bethlehem, twenty children is such a small number that the slaughter will soon be forgotten. By next Christmas we will be back to business as usual with nothing changed except the continuing births of innocent children into a perpetually insane and dangerous world.