

# Refugees from Violence

sermon digest

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Matthew 2:13-23

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I have never seen a greeting card that features today's text from Matthew about Herod and the Bethlehem massacre and the flight to Egypt by the holy family, and I can't imagine anyone who would want to focus attention on the story as the blessing of Christmas. Like it or not, it is a part of Matthew's birth narrative and a part of the New Testament report on the coming of Christ. Our culture does not mind mythical embellishments that stay on the warm and comfortable side of a cozy God, but Matthew's horrible story does not fit our image of Christmas as a season of joy and peace. Herod and his horrible decree belongs with Dickens' Scrooge and Dr. Seuss's Grinch as bad guys out to spoil our joy or steal our Christmas, but even Scrooge and Grinch have happy endings. We can rightly leave Herod off our Christmas cards and out of our joyful celebration, but we cannot erase his story from our Gospel. Why did Matthew include a story that makes us squirm?

***The Christmas stories emerge in a context.*** Herod is identified in the context of the birth narratives in Luke as well as Matthew, and he was certainly capable of the slaughter in Bethlehem, but there is no corroboration of the slaughter of babies by Josephus or any other reporter of the time. Scholars reason that the execution of babies in Bethlehem could hardly escape the notice of Romans, much less of Jews. So with a sigh of relief, even some conservative biblical scholars tend to agree that the Bethlehem massacre is not a fact of history, certainly not exactly as Matthew describes it. Perhaps we are justified in ignoring Matthew's indiscretion on grounds of historical interpretation.

Appointed by Rome to rule the Jewish province, Herod the Great is significantly anchored in history as the regent of record at the birth of Christ. Herod is an important facet of the Roman context of Jesus' birth and life. Roman emperors did not particularly care what Herod did to his people as long as he kept the peace. In spite of his unpopularity with the Jews, Herod stands in history as the one man most responsible for the magnificent construction of the third Jewish temple in Jerusalem. The Temple, still under construction during the ministry of Jesus, figures prominently in both the acts and teachings of Jesus. Ironically this Roman monument that allowed Jews to maintain their religion was destroyed in the Roman invasion of 70 CE, and to this day has not been reconstructed.

Herod's insane jealousy of his authority is well documented. Early in his reign, he systematically eliminated Hasmonean leaders, descendants of the revolutionary Maccabees. In his final years Herod had three of his sons executed for fear that they were plotting a *coup de tat*. As he was dying, he ordered the execution of the third son and, according to Josephus, decreed the execution of one person in every household to guarantee an appropriate mourning for his death. Thankfully, his final will was ignored, but Caesar Augustus was said to have punned, "It is better to be Herod's pig (*hus*) than his son (*huios*)." Some have argued that a Roman regent capable of killing his own children would not hesitate to slaughter Jewish babies in Bethlehem.

The number of children killed in Bethlehem was obviously exaggerated by later reports. 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 the apocalyptic heavenly population, 144,000. Bethlehem was a small village of about 1,000 residents containing perhaps twenty children under age two. So 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 affected, but the story which was passed on to Matthew became part of the Christmas tradition.

There is also a Jewish context to the birth of Jesus. Matthew is the Gospel to the Jews. He is intent on presenting Jesus as the expected Messiah of God promised in the Old Testament. Raymond Brown counts some fourteen formula citations in Matthew that cite an Old Testament passage, usually the Prophets, as a reference to the Jesus story and proof that Jesus is Messiah, the Christ of God. 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 from the slaughter of Hebrew boys by order of Pharaoh. Pharaoh's horrible decree to execute Jewish boys is echoed in Herod's order to destroy the newborn King of the Jews. And Moses' escape and

return to Egypt is in the background of the holy family's escape to Egypt.

Matthew 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 Christmas message continues in the context of this violent world.*** On December 14 we passed the first anniversary of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in Newtown, Connecticut. Although the senseless tragedy has not been forgotten, media attention has been somewhat subdued on this first anniversary. The coincident fiftieth anniversary of the assassination of John Kennedy on November 23 may have provided a public distraction, but victim families specifically asked that their privacy be respected. The media seems to have learned to distinguish between good and bad news, between celebrations and tragedies. We celebrate birth and life. We remember death and tragedy. The anniversary of the Newtown horror did not escape public attention, but there have been fewer interviews of grieving parents and fewer displays of public grief than we have come to expect. We might prefer to look away, but the harsh reality of history demands that we remember. The meaningless slaughter of twenty children and six adults is an event that is both too horrible and too fresh in memory to ignore, but it will always be remembered on December 14, during Advent, while "Jingle Bells" ring at the Mall and the media discusses the possibility of a white Christmas.

A few years ago, I was confronted with a complaint about the observance of Advent. I was told that "O Come, O Come Emanuel" was too depressing for the season. I should instruct the minister of music to avoid minor keys at this time of year. I think that is why folks keep insisting that we sing Christmas carols instead of Advent hymns. But Advent preparation for Christmas is a time of penance and reflection on the order of Lent before Easter. But if we follow Matthew, even Christmas sounds a dissonant note.

Matthew's story about Herod may not be historically accurate, but it accurately describes the world into which Jesus was born and sadly continues to describe the violent world in which we live. The bad news of Christmas got through to me when I was a young pastor serving a congregation between Fort Knox and Louisville, Kentucky. I was a seminary graduate student. The holiday vacation from school allowed time to make pastoral calls that I could not make during the school term. I made the rounds to the homes of elderly and home bound members. I have not forgotten my visit to Mrs. Horton. Although grateful for a visit from her pastor, she seemed a bit distant and distracted. I noticed that she had no decorations outside or inside her house— no Christmas tree, no Santas, no bright ribbons or lights. She proceeded to share that three times in her life, she had to take down Christmas trees because of deaths in her family, one for her husband and twice for her children. Christmas always reminder her of tragedy. Maybe the grief of Bethlehem made sense in Matthew's story.

Dot White was the real estate agent who helped us in moving to Oak Ridge. I learned of the tragedy in her life from a friend. Her son by marriage to Tom was an emergency room physician at the hospital. One Christmas their grandson fell on a skate board, struck his head on a curb, and died from a cerebral hemorrhage. The next Christmas their physician son had a stroke while attending a patient in the hospital and died in almost the identical manner of his son. When Dot's husband Tom was dying with lung cancer in mid-December, I understood the teenage grandson's quip that death has become a family Christmas tradition.

Theologians struggle with the strange providence in Matthew's Gospel that allows the holy family to escape to Egypt, while the families of Bethlehem are left to mourn the deaths of their children. I share the sense of injustice every time I hear someone boast of how God has chosen them for healing or success while ignoring the thousands of equally faithful people who are left to mourn with the parents of Bethlehem. It may not have been historical or scientifically accurate to please our Enlightenment understanding of truth, but Matthew's picture of violence in his world and ours was right on target. In fact, the stories of Christmas came long after the reality of Jesus' death on a Roman cross. The refugee holy family seeking safety in Egypt was only able to delay the inevitable death of Jesus.