

Isaiah 63:7-9
Matthew 2:13-23

“The Massacre of the Innocents” 30 December 2007
First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL Christmas One
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Here’s my problem this morning – I don’t really want to preach from this passage this week. Not *this* week, for a number of reasons. This is an awkward text that the lectionary throws at us, this first Sunday after Christmas. No one really wants to hear this, and it is somewhat out of place. It follows the visit of the Magi to Jesus, which we will actually read next week. And this is about what happens next. An angel of the Lord warns Joseph to take Jesus and Mary and escape into Egypt, that King Herod is going to try to kill him. Joseph does so. And Herod, who was tricked by the Magi (who did not give up Jesus’ precise location) became enraged and ordered his soldiers to kill all the children under two years old in and around Bethlehem. Bethlehem was a small place then, so we may be talking about two dozen children, maybe no more than thirty-five. But that’s 35 too many. You Star Wars fans could call it “The Empire Strikes Back,” this response of Herod’s to news that the Messiah is born.

Not a warm, fuzzy story for the season. Yet, as Professor Stanley Hauerwas says: “Perhaps no other event in the gospel more determinatively challenges the sentimental depiction of Christmas than the death of these children. Jesus is born into a world in which children are killed, and continue to be killed, to protect the power of tyrants” (like Herod).ⁱ

No one but Matthew records this atrocity, but it is certainly consistent with what we know about Herod – and not just from the Bible but from Roman historical sources. Herod had three of his sons killed so they wouldn’t challenge him for the throne, and one of his ten wives because he didn’t trust her. He left orders that when he died, a representative set of regional leaders were to be executed, to make sure that someone would be in mourning that day. I guess he knew they wouldn’t miss him. “Don’t cry for me, Palestine.” He was capable of this. Caesar Augustus famously commented: I’d rather be Herod’s pig (*hus*) than his son (*huios*).ⁱⁱ Tolstoy wrote that a great portion of the evils that afflict humankind derive from the erroneous believe that life can be made secure by violence.ⁱⁱⁱ

So the holy family fled into Egypt, and escaped. The story is kind of a reverse Exodus tale. They go *to* Egypt instead of away. Herod’s murder of the infant boys recalls Pharaoh’s order to murder the male children of the Hebrews. Matthew, in writing this, interprets what happens as fulfillment of prophecy – *not* that God willed this to happen, Matthew never says that. But he sees fulfillment of prophecy. He cites Jeremiah (31:5): “A voice is heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation. It is Rachel, weeping for her children. She refused to be consoled, because they were no more.” That is a reference to the destruction of the northern tribes, at the hands of Assyria.

Later, when Herod dies, the angels instruct Joseph to take his family back to Israel, and tell him where to settle. As our Old Testament text today says, God is experienced as personal, without intermediary; God's deeds are experienced in history and God is with us – Emmanuel.

Emily Martin, of Wesley Methodist Church in Eugene, Oregon, writes:

The echoes tell us everything. When Joseph is warned in a dream to flee to Egypt, we naturally think of next week's nocturnal warning to the wise men to go home another way. When Herod murders any child two years old or under, we hearken back to Pharaoh and his deadly edict. Danger is everywhere. Even at his birth, Jesus is shadowed by destruction... From the beginning, Jesus is at risk. He's a threat to power."

That's the story. The massacre of the innocent children of Bethlehem, and how Jesus escaped. What are we to do with this?

Three days ago we had a funeral service in this sanctuary for two - a young mother who suffered from post-partum psychosis, and killed her 7 week old son and then herself, leaving the young father grieving. By every account, the mother was a delightful and loving person, a gift on the earth. Also, I learned some things this week. Post-partum depression is not uncommon, but post-partum psychosis is rare, and is sudden onset. Hard to see it coming, and usually does not end this tragically. That's all by way of asking what this nexus of things means for us.

First – this is not the will of God. Not the massacre of the children of Bethlehem by Herod, not the death of that young child. The language Matthew uses in his Gospel suggests fulfillment of prophecy, but not the will of God. God doesn't do this. We live in a fallen world where things happen that are not God's will.

And the challenge of this day and this text is to not just traumatize you with sad stories. It is easy to come up with illustrations of how the massacre of the innocents continues in our world. Here we see that Christmas marks God breaking into human life in every way, and that means not just sweet baby stories, but human life that contains the bloody bodies of children and screaming parents and the terror of Herod. Herod is still with us. And the innocents today are those children who are captured and trafficked for the sex trade; children in the third world enslaved to be mine workers or soldiers; children in Iraq dismembered by bombs; children I met in Peru being slowly and inexorably poisoned in the name of free enterprise by a mining company headquartered in St. Louis, Missouri; children in West Africa carrying guns; children in Rwanda who were hacked with machetes; children dying of AIDS or orphaned by the disease.

Or, we could give examples in our city of children who go to sleep at night with empty stomachs, who are afraid to go to school in the morning because of bullies and taunts they will face, of children who - because that is how our society works - will be dealing drugs and dying in a hail of gunfire before they are grown.

Is it enough to name the evils of Herod, and bear witness to the dying? Or do we have to respond somehow? It is not God's will that Herod massacred Bethlehem's children, but what *is* God's will?

The angels didn't just sing nicely to the shepherds and then leave. God's messengers give the guidance that rescues Jesus, saves the infant Messiah. That is the promise for us. And that is the road atlas for us – save the children.

There are the tangible things this congregation does – the creation of First Light shelter for women and children who are homeless; that is one thing that defies Herod. The tutoring project we ran for children in the city center here. The Child Development Center for parents working downtown. Redeemer Center in Kenya, for families torn apart by AIDS, and children orphaned by the disease. Those are valiant efforts.

And still our city is not a happy home for many of its children. Schools are under stress. Violence, hunger, drugs and firearms are omnipresent on our streets. How many have no health care, and are growing up imperiled? *A voice is heard in Ramah...Rachel, weeping for her children. She refused to be consoled, because they were no more.*

What we do here at First Presbyterian needs to matter for the next generation. There are young people who need an adult to listen without judgment. There are children who need to grow up in a community where they get a model of common life that is different from what they see on TV. The children who may need us the most are not here. There are city planners who need to hear from us the human and ethical voice regarding choices made as the city revitalizes. I don't have the answers to all that, but I want it on our screen. Perhaps it is something we create together as we forge our mission over the coming years.

Here is the Good News, from a very grim story. In the midst of impending death, God's messengers gave the guidance that saved the future for us all. Jesus the infant Messiah in the manger is with us in all our beginnings. Jesus the refugee Messiah, displaced and homeless, is with us in all our wanderings... and in all our peril does not abandon us. Jesus, Emmanuel, Jesus the Christ, God with us, came and survived all the evil we could wreak, even death, and rose for us... so that we may have new life and that abundantly... so we may know that nothing in all creation can separate us from God's love... so we may live not only in the shadow of the cross, but also in the shadow of the manger.

- ⁱ Hauerwas, Stanley “Matthew”, Brazos Theological Commentary, Brazos Press, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007
- ⁱⁱ Macrobius Saturnalia 2.4.11
- ⁱⁱⁱ Tolstoy, Leo “My Religion” Thos. Crowell & Co., New York, 1885