

Matthew 2: 13-21

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When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, 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 wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: '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.'

When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead.' Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel.

Hide the Kids! It's Christmas!

Rev. Pam Everhart

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As I told the children, tomorrow is the last day of the year. It's New Year's Eve, time to make New Year's resolutions, but first, you get to stay up late and party the night away, right? Maybe that's fun, or not so fun, depending on who you are. A wise man once said, "Youth is when you're allowed to stay up late for New Year's Eve, and middle age is when you're forced to." Besides the revelry, New Year's Eve is also the time, like I told the kids, for the resolutions. Most people I know say they don't make them any more, or that they never made them, but I don't believe you. There's just something about that calendar turning from 07 to 08 that makes us all feel like we have a clean slate, that whatever we screwed up last year is gone. 07 is gone and not coming back, and so we can do something more successful in the areas that we failed last year. But we do doubt that we succeed, right? We don't think we can make it sometimes. Maybe that's the start of our failure. Mark Twain, who is the source of all great wisdom, said, "New Year's Day now is the accepted time to make your annual good resolutions. Next week you can begin paving hell with them, as usual."

I know, for me, I've had the same thoughts for the last decade: This is the year, this is the year I will definitely lost that thirty pounds, and this is how it's going to be different this year. I've thought about it, I haven't said it out loud until now, and some of our New Year's resolutions tend to be quite amusing, like my friend who said he was going to give up smoking and he had never smoked at all. Or my attempts to lose thirty pounds for ten years. Or these, that I found on the Internet. From a 13-year-old girl: "I will not look at boys." Or this one from a lazy but smart college student, college male: "I will do less

laundry and wear more deodorant.” Or this one, from someone described as an expert cusser: “I will learn to cuss in different languages.”

But today isn't New Year's Day yet, is it. It's not even New Year's Eve. Next week is Epiphany. But this Sunday, it's still Christmas. This is the first Sunday after Christmas, the only Sunday after Christmas this year, and today our Scripture reading doesn't read of that cozy crèche, those songs we've been singing today about the Holy Family and blessed baby that we cradle. No, this Scripture is a little darker. I preached this sermon at eight, and after it I said to David Dalke, “Wow, that's a dark sermon.” But it is part of our Christmas lectionary. Hear these words from Matthew 2, 13 through 21.

Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, ‘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.’ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, ‘Out of Egypt I have called my son.’

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When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, ‘Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead.’ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel.

It's kind of a dark text. In today's text we're confronted with what some people have called the dark side of Christmas, the side of power politics, fear, and murder. We read of Herod's decision to have all the children killed in hopes of keeping that one Messiah that was supposed to have been born from rising up. We often want to leave this part of the story behind, we want to toss it out with the wrapping paper, because we don't want it to interrupt our joyful lullaby-filled celebrations. I remember when I was getting ready to think about preparing for this sermon, I was talking to Ray and he said, “I think that's the story of Herod slaughtering the Innocents, that's the lectionary reading that day,” and I thought, “Oh, maybe it is. Maybe I'll do something else.” But that really is beside the point. I mean, actually, lectionary planning teams, the people who prepare the lectionary for the reading cycle, left it out for years. Verses 16 through 18 were not in our lectionary readings for a while, because no one wants to think about babies dying for no good reason other than to protect someone's political power. And yet, it has been put back in. There it is, plain as day in Matthew 2, verse 16. “When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, 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 wise men.”

A good friend of mine said to me about the text this week, “Well, that’s not really proven to be true, is it? We don’t have any historical evidence that Herod actually did that.” Yeah, that’s true. Actually, we don’t have any historical evidence that any of Matthew’s story happened, wise men, the flight to Egypt. Take that for what it’s worth. But someone chose to put it back in our lectionary text, because someone saw the importance of putting Herod back in the Christmas story. You see, the real message here isn’t historicity, it’s theology. It’s not about fact, but about truth. This story is about the Herods of the world continuing to seek to destroy and extinguish the light of Christ, the light of joy and goodness in our world. It was true at the time of Jesus’ birth, and it’s true now. This story is one of power, the power of love and light versus the dark power of political enterprise. You see, Herod never really left, because the Herods of this world continue to stay with us.

That’s not the only thing that struck me, as I read this story. What also struck me is found in verses 13 and 14. “An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, ‘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.’ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt.” These verses share with us God’s protection over God’s chosen one, Jesus. An angel of the Lord appears to Joseph in a dream and says, “Get the heck out of Dodge, your child is in danger.” Joseph, lucky Joseph. Lucky Joseph is blessed to receive a vision from an angel of the Lord. Good for him. Good for Jesus. They heed the advice, and the child is spared. But in this story that’s not so for the innocents that are left behind. The story indicates that all the other children in and around Bethlehem were killed. Christmas came for the first time, and if only their parents had been given the same warning – “Hide the kids, it’s Christmas.” Where were their angels of the Lord? Why didn’t their dads get a vision? I mean, after all, they were innocent bystanders to this whole Messiah birth business. They’re just living their lives and, bam, their children are gone, for no good reason. Political power, self-interest. Where’s God? Why aren’t the masses protected?

Well, it may be dark, but what we have here is Christmas unplugged, Christmas exposed, Christmas the reality show. This Christmas is as far away from the little drummer boys, and Linus reciting Luke 2 on a stage. This is another night in Bethlehem, but this night is not about life, but about death; not about *excelsis deo* but about the absolute power of the domination state.

Now, in the Gospel of Luke, that’s the story we always read on Christmas Eve, we have Jesus portrayed as born poor to peasant parents, showing God’s arrival in a common, simple, ordinary way, into a world of little. Matthew’s story is very different, Matthew’s story has Jesus as actually having much, because he’s sheltered, he’s protected from harm. He’s actually quite privileged in this account. The others, the people left behind, they’re the common ones – they don’t have access to the latest terrorist report. And so, like it or not, we see Christmas from the dark side. We sit in our cozy homes and we relax around glittering trees and overstuffed stockings, at least that’s what we did at my house. We’re the angel-protected of Christmas. We have the benefits of not being targeted. We have the benefit of being able to run from danger, or maybe even buy our

way out of it. And yet, within our same town, maybe even on our same street, we have those around us without such protection, those within Herod's sights. Our economic structure sets up a reality that allows for innocent people to be in danger day after day, mostly at the expense of children, and this commercial frenzy that we've created and we now call Christmas in our culture, that's really for privileged people, and it has to heighten their agony. I'm sure many parents who are just struggling to survive would like to shield their kids from the Christmas we have come to create in our country. Money spent here and money spent there, glitzy gifts, air travel, vacations, skiing. A lot of children around us everywhere have none of those trappings, and they also have the peril of an economic structure that's out of whack and affects mostly them. There are children around us, in our streets, perhaps living next door to us, who have no health insurance. There are children who are forced to endure drug abuse and other addictions of their parents. There are children who are left alone night after night because their parents are working three or four jobs just so they can live in a good neighborhood. And in other places, maybe not next door to us, there are children with no home. There are children in developing countries who are orphaned because of the AIDS pandemic or other diseases. All of these children stand on the backstage of life and watch all of us in the spotlight, and all of our children, shine.

The text says, "And Rachel weeps for her children." My question for us is, do we? Do we weep for the children who have no angel protection? And what if we did? What if, despite the Herod power structure, we decided to stand in solidarity with the ones who have no angel to protect them? Some of you already do that, I know. What if we all did, though? What if we all became their angel protectors? The song, "Star Child," that we just sang before the sermon implores us to notice all the different kinds of children who need the light of Christmas. Jesus is the Star Child, and Jesus brings Christmas to our world every year, but only with our help. We are to help Christmas come to everyone, everyone alive. "The street child, the beat child, the child with no place left to go. The hurt child, the used child, the child no one wants to know. The grown and old child with a memory full of years, and the sad and lost child, whose story is told in tears." And yes, the song even mentions the spared and spoiled child, who has and wants more. All of these children deserve our protection. Are we, in this new year, willing to become angel protectors to all of our children? Or are we complacent to remain with Herod, filled with fear and willing to use whatever means necessary to maintain the status quo?

It takes courage to move past Herod's power. Remember the wise men? The wise men went home by another way. They refused to report to Herod. Can we? This year, this text suggest to us a different kind of new year's resolution. It's not about losing thirty pounds. It's about walking with Christ. Seek out those in danger. Move beyond this warm and cozy sanctuary into the cold, dark reality of Christmas. This year, for your new year's resolution, bring light to everyone alive, every chance you get.

See you next year.

