

SCRIPTURE

Matthew 2:13–23

The Escape to Egypt

¹³ 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.”

¹⁴ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, ¹⁵ and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, “Out of Egypt I have called my son.”

The Massacre of the Infants

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.

¹⁷ Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

¹⁸ “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.”

The Return from Egypt

¹⁹ When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, ²⁰ “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.”

²¹ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. ²² But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee.

²³ There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, “He will be called a Nazorean.”

MESSAGE

Our Christmas celebrations are over. Carols have been sung, presents have been opened, and families gathered for the festivities are now heading home. The short daylight hours and turkey hangovers have most of us feeling sedentary – it’s time to sit back and relax, basking in the warm afterglow of feasting and family.

In accordance with this picture of contentment, most of you will have come to church this morning for a gentle message of peace and goodwill, a reinforcement of the seasonal message of hope that marks the coming of the Christchild.

Instead, your post-holiday slumber has been pierced by a gruesome tale; a tale of babies being torn from their mothers and slaughtered before them while protective fathers are beaten, and older siblings cower in fear.

In this season we speak of the baby Jesus as the hope of the world, and really all babies represent hope. Each tiny life is a bundle of pure potential – any one of them could grow up and change the world – every one of them will at least change one person's world. They are as yet unstained, unmarked by the world – innocent, fresh, and good. Babies are hope.

Yet, as the hope of all humanity entered the world, the hope of an entire village was wiped out. Why do we need to hear about this today? Why shake us up at this particular moment? Is the story even true?

I've heard some people dispute this event, saying that it was never recorded in any official history other than Matthews gospel, therefore it didn't happen. That argument doesn't carry much weight with me though.

In the Roman culture, babies were considered property, not people. The practice of exposure was common – unwanted babies were simply left outside to die and nothing was thought of it. Phoenicians, Canaanites, Syrians, and Moabites regularly sacrificed babies. Babies didn't count for much back then.

Add to that the fact that Bethlehem was a small village, and the number of infants killed likely would have been around ten or fifteen – certainly no more than twenty – so though this event would have been catastrophic to the village, it wouldn't make the papers elsewhere.

And the same is true today. Even with modern communication and our ever shrinking world, massacres like this continue and very few pay attention. In 2017, 881 children were killed by Boko Haram in Nigeria. Nobody knows their names. And that's only one trouble spot on the globe.

Even in our own country we don't have to look very far back in history to find children ripped from their parents to uphold and protect the powers of the state. The truth is that the murder of children for political reasons is not some isolated fable from one chapter of the bible. It continues to this day and we don't know how many thousands of children are murdered every year for political reasons. We don't want to know.

For this reason, I don't put much stock in the argument that simply because Josephus never wrote about Herod's slaughter that it didn't happen. Especially when we look a little more closely at Herod himself and some of his other deeds.

Herod fought his way to power over three years, all the while switching his allegiances from Julius Caesar, to Mark Antony, then Octavian, who was later known as Caesar Augustus.

He married the niece of his chief rival to provide himself with some measure of legitimacy as he killed his way to the throne, but later he murdered his own wife because he didn't trust her.

He killed three of his own sons for the same reason, another wife, his mother in law, and even his own brother was scheduled to be assassinated - he only escaped his fate by dying on his own before Herod's men got to him.

Herod was so despotic even Caesar Augustus himself said 'It is better to be Herod's pig than his son.'

As his death approached, realizing that he was generally despised by the people that he ruled so brutally Herod supposedly gathered the most eminent men of each village in Judea and locked them up in the Hippodrome, ordering his sister Salome to have them killed when he died. The quote attributed to him said 'Though there may not be mourning because of my death, there will be mourning at my death.'

Salome did not follow Herod's final order – but that doesn't change the fact that this was his will – Herod's legacy was one of suffering.

That legacy of suffering continued through his surviving children. At Herod's death, Caesar Augustus determined that there would no longer be a king in Judea, so he divided the kingdom into four – a tetrarchy – governed by three of Herod's remaining sons, and his sister Salome.

One of these sons, Archelaus, took over the areas of Judea, Samaria, and Idumea. He was so oppressive that the emperor Augustus removed him from office after only two years, replacing him with a succession of prefects, one of whom, Pontius Pilate actually completed what Herod tried to do – kill the Christ child.

Another of Herod's ruling sons, Herod Antipas, was the one who stole his brother's wife, then killed John the Baptizer for drawing attention to his sleaziness.

Herod's grandson Agrippa executed James the brother of John, and arrested Peter.

The whole line that bore Herod's name also bore his brutality and despotism.

Herod's reign was marked by cruelty, but the reason he was called Herod the Great was because of his grand building projects. His greatest project was the rebuilding and beautification of the temple in Jerusalem, restoring it to even greater splendor than in the time of Solomon.

He also built elaborate bath and cistern systems in Jericho – the world's oldest city – the self named Herodium, a fortress between Bethlehem and Jerusalem, grand fortresses in Masada, Sebaste, Macharus, the tomb of the Patriarchs, and the city of Caesarea, named for Caesar Augustus.

But these great projects were all tainted. They weren't built to advance society and make people's lives better. All of them were monuments to insecurity.

The grand temple was essentially a bribe to the Jewish people. To maintain power Herod had to keep his subjects subjected, and he did that by appeasing the aristocrats with a world-class temple while whipping the lower classes.

Herod built Caesarea as a bribe to the Emperor. He was aware that he only served as king as long as he continued to please the Caesar, so he built Caesarea as a gesture of his obedience and servitude.

All of Herod's other projects were fortresses. He knew he only held power very tenuously, and knew he could never be far from a defensible stronghold, thus he made sure he had plenty of refuges available to himself.

All of this paints a picture of a ruler who is insecure – afraid. Afraid of the people below him, afraid of the people above him, and even afraid of his own family – those he should be closest to.

This is why this morning's narrative of the slaughter of infants is credible to me. It is completely in character for this paranoid king.

So then, is that the point of today's scripture? Herod is a wicked man – don't be like Herod? I don't think so. I think that the author is getting at something a lot deeper and a lot more relevant to us.

Matthew is describing to us the fragile nature of worldly power, by contrasting it with what heavenly power looks like.

Herod represents worldly power – power that is seized – that is taken by force. This kind of power lives in constant fear because that which is illegitimately stolen can be snatched away in a moment.

This fear is demonstrated by Herod's pandering to those he needs, his brutal oppression of those he can control, and his murder of those who are potential threats. Even if that threat is a baby.

It's interesting to think that a baby can be a threat. When God chose to enter the world he opted for the most vulnerable of forms – a human infant that cannot do anything on its own. Is there any more gentle or unassuming form that God could have taken?

And yet, even to a man who is king, who kills with impunity, a baby who cannot speak, stand, or even survive for more than a few hours without help is a legitimate threat.

It is a very fragile institution that can be brought down by a baby. Today's power structures are not significantly different. Just look at the effect that an autistic Swedish schoolgirl is having on the juggernaut that is the fossil fuel industry.

She is feared – you can tell this by reading the character assassinations online. Rich men in suits consider her a threat, otherwise there would be no need to post comments belittling her and attempting to discredit her, they could just safely ignore her.

Greta is only one of a long line of nobodies who are a threat to supposedly great power. Joan of Arc, Desmond Tutu, Rosa Park, Martin Luther King, Martin Luther himself. Does anybody even know the name of the man in Tiananmen Square who faced down the Chinese army with only a grocery bag?

Worldly power is weak, fragile, and must be on constant guard. It is brash and boastful – lording it over others, constantly striving to make clear who is in charge and guard against clear and present dangers.

But that is all showmanship and posturing. It is not power. Do you ever watch old kung fu movies? Who is the one you have to look out for? It's never the loud one who is causing all the ruckus. It's always the little guy sitting quietly in the corner, when he stands up you know that something spectacular is about to happen.

It was Jesus who first modelled this humble leadership for us. In an age where the most ruthless dominate the rest, Jesus, the true power of the universe, entered into his own creation in the most humble and vulnerable form imaginable.

He could have come as a twelve foot warrior surrounded with legions of angels, as a T-rex, or as a mountain of fire. But no. True power does not need to intimidate or seek attention. True power doesn't need to shore itself up by crushing down others. True power simply is.

Not only did Jesus model the fact that true power is not grasping, he taught his disciples directly when they started squabbling about who was going to be next in line under Jesus.

He said to them 'You've seen how godless rulers throw their weight around, how quickly a little power goes to their heads. It's not going to be that way with you. Whoever wants to be great must become a servant. This is what I've done – I've come to serve, not be served, and to give away my life in exchange for the many who are held hostage.'

This is the hope of the Christ child. It is the hope that things don't have to continue the way they always have been; that there is a new way, a peaceful way that isn't based upon the violent enforcement of the old structures.

It is a way that enters softly, and yet changes absolutely everything. And everything is changing despite what we may see. To some, Matthew's Christmas story is bleak. No shepherds come to see the wonder, no heavenly choir sings Glory to God in the highest. Instead, tyrants kill children, families flee in the middle of the night. Matthew accurately and realistically depicts the terror and turbulence of a violent world – this is no sanitized version of reality.

But Matthew dares to see things as they are in their ugly starkness and still declare the presence of God – God is working among us even in the darkest of days. Nothing can defeat God's promise of Emmanuel, God with us. That is the hope that is changing and liberating the world, the light that can never be overcome.