

Not the Final Word – Matthew 2:13-23 – January 1, 2017

During Christmas we hear the stories surrounding the nativity of Jesus and we sing songs of joy and peace, love and expectation. It is a time when we reconnect with friends and family, a time to celebrate. It is a time to look ahead into the New Year. Sometimes we get wrapped up in the nostalgia, and we imagine a world of silent nights and heavenly peace, a world when swords will be beaten into plowshares.

But that time is not yet.

On this first day of the New Year, the gospel lesson from Matthew stands in stark contrast. The reality of our world breaks into the scene. The story reminds us of why God sent Jesus into the world as a helpless infant. It reminds us that we live in a world desperate for a savior.

The story in Matthew's gospel paints an ugly picture of the brutality of King Herod and portrays the refugee status of Joseph, Mary and their baby as they are forced to flee Bethlehem in the middle of the night. We would rather avert our eyes from this dreadful scene. No one wants to think about soldiers killing babies. We prefer the idealism.

We don't want to think about the holy family having to run for their lives to Egypt. The birth of Jesus was not good news to everyone. To the rulers and powers of this world, the birth of Jesus signaled change. Herod was a jealous man. He killed members of his own family when he felt threatened by them. So when the wise ones did not return to Jerusalem after their visit to Bethlehem, Herod lashed out on the families there. Without hesitation, he ordered his men to slaughter babies.

We might wonder why Matthew included this story in his gospel. To answer that question, we have to look at Matthew's audience. His readers were most likely Jewish Christians who had a deep understanding of Jewish scripture and history. One of Matthew's goals was to depict the gospel of Jesus as a fulfillment of Judaism, so throughout his gospel, we will see many examples of his effort to highlight the connections between Jesus and Israel's history. His audience would recognize the references to Israel's history. We may have a harder time making the connection.

So let's look at the story through the lens of the history of Israel. First, we have one angry ruler. Next take a helpless infant and add the wholesale slaughter of innocent male babies, and then make reference to the land of Egypt. Does that remind you of any particular story in the Old Testament? How about the story of an Egyptian Pharaoh who was disturbed by the proliferation of the people held there as slaves. There were too many Hebrews running around, and Pharaoh was getting nervous about that, fearing an uprising.

To control their population, the pharaoh demanded that every male child born to the Hebrews should be drowned in the Nile River. But one woman went against these orders. She hid her baby for three

months, and then she put him in a basket on the river. The baby was found and adopted by the Pharaoh's daughter. She named him Moses.

Matthew, then, by depicting the anger of Herod and the slaughter of male babies and the flight to Egypt, is portraying Jesus as a second Moses. And like Moses, he was sent into the world to deliver his people from tyranny and oppression. Matthew's readers would have made the connection between the two stories, and they would expect to see in Jesus' life and works, the working out of God's deliverance and fulfillment of God's promises.

In a similar way, Matthew makes a reference to the prophet Jeremiah who wrote of a "voice heard in Ramah, with wailing a loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children, she refused to be consoled because they are no more." Rachel was the wife of Jacob. When she died in childbirth, legend says she was buried in Bethlehem or nearby Ramah.

Later in history, when the kingdom of Judah was defeated, the Israelites were taken into captivity. Many of them were forced to go to Babylon. According to the prophet Jeremiah, as the Israelites passed by Rachel's grave, she wept at the fate of her people, her children. Rachel became the symbolic mother of the nation of Israel, and she wept for them as they cried out to God for deliverance.

The Babylonian exile was a major point in Israel's history. So in his gospel, Matthew ties this historical reference from the prophet Jeremiah about Rachel weeping for the exiles, to the act of Herod slaughtering all the male babies in Bethlehem. And just like the Israelites who had to live in exile in Babylon, Mary, Joseph and Jesus also became refugees as they fled Bethlehem to seek asylum in Egypt. Matthew wants his readers to see these deep connections between Jesus and their history as a people.

Today's lesson from Matthew's gospel is difficult for us to read, because we have a different frame of reference than Matthew's original audience. We don't like to have the Christmas story contaminated by the slaughter of a bunch of innocent babies. We don't like to imagine the family of Jesus on the run in a foreign land. We don't like to be reminded that this is the real world where we live. Where innocents are killed every hour of every day. Where people are forced from their home on a grand scale.

We don't have to look too far to see examples of this and other horrific situations in our world. Take the current tragedy in Syria, for example. According to the latest statistics from World Vision, 4.8 million Syrians are refugees and 6.1 million are displaced within Syria. Half of these are children. Just last night, on New Year's Eve, a gunman dressed as Santa opened fire in a nightclub in Istanbul, killing 39 and injuring others. But there are countless stories we hear about daily on the news. Violence, starvation, abductions, homelessness. We don't want to hear these stories. They make us

uncomfortable. Especially at this time of year – during the holiday season. This is the world into which the savior came.

The story in Matthew's gospel is uncomfortable to hear. We would rather not know how bad things can really get. We try to ignore or avoid it, hoping that maybe it will go away. Yet sometimes we get a small taste of that suffering in our own lives. We may not be able to grasp the nature and scope of the atrocities that occur in our world, but I came across an article written by a woman in South Dakota that makes the message of this passage a little more real. I'll close with this article, written by Donna Marmorstein. It is entitled, "Can death obliterate Christmas? Ask Herod." She writes:

"Early in December, when stars seem sharper and bluer than at other times, Christmas music seems to sharpen them even more. I unpack my age-old Christmas record collection. I'll put on 'Goodyear's Great Songs of Christmas' with Mitch Miller and the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. I'll brew some cinnamon tea, light a mulberry-scented candle and write Christmas cards. Usually, when stamps, return labels, address book and cards are arrayed before me, the carols swirl up together with the steam, and my toes turn warm. A bone-radiating satisfaction takes over.

"Renewing contact with friends is one of the best parts of Christmas. But this year something went wrong. It started when I tried to write a Christmas greeting to my aunt. How can you wish holiday cheer to someone who just lost a husband to cancer? Her chance of merriment at Christmas is about nil. My pen froze in midair as I tried to think of something to write. How jolly will her Christmas be, as she tries to mix celebration with grief? And his death will mar Christmases to come. My uncle's voice, singing every morning as he shaved, now stilled. His jokes, smiles, and positive outlook – all gone.

"And what do I write to warm the spirits of friends whose youngest child drowned in a lake this summer? Merry Christmas? Right. Every mall, every shop they enter where toys just right for a 6-year-old boy sit on display will become a torture chamber. No message I can write can convey joy without pain. There's no way around it.

"My address book isn't what it used to be either. Every page has abandoned addresses now.

"My grandpa, long gone. My grandma, who every Christmas cooked up fudge, divinity and sugared walnuts, can't receive my Christmas greetings now. My other grandma, whose flashbulb, always malfunctioned Christmas morning – is dead, too, and I would love to feel her knobby, blue-veined hand on mine once more, and watch her 'fiddle with' her camera now.

"Her sister, wise, warmhearted Auntie Faye, died Christmas morning in her sleep at 97. Her address still echoes in my book. All the expired addresses accumulate, and suddenly ripples spot my envelopes. The candle flickers out, the record player grinds to a halt. Stars blur and fall. The needles

on the tree all turn brown and drop to the floor. Death creeps into my address book. It grips my pen and tries to overpower Christmas. No carol seems able to withstand its ugly claw.

“But then the turntable starts up again. The Coventry carol plays: *By, by, lully, lullay/Herod the king in all his raging/Charged he hath this day/His men of might, in his own sight/All young children to slay.*

“The only carol I know that mentions Herod’s slaughter of the innocents to destroy the Christ child, and, consequently, Christmas. Pain, grief, and fear riddled the first Christmas. This problem goes back a long time. Herod, however, did not have this day. Death does not have this day.

“In fact, the whole reason behind Christmas was to overthrow the power of death and sin and hell. So when death creeps up and grabs a loved one, Christmas kicks death in the teeth and say, ‘You can’t keep that one. That’s mine.’ Death, where is thy sting? Stuck somewhere under the mistletoe, I suspect.

“The needles fly back onto the tree and turn green. Falling stars rise and shine, reshaped. My cold tea steams up again. The candle relights. Appropriate, hopeful words spill from my pen onto cards. And Christmas, if not always merry, is always, always victorious.”

(<http://www3.northern.edu/marmorsa/christmasbeatsdeath.htm>)