

## **“A World in Need” – Matthew 2:13-23 – January 5, 2020**

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During the Advent and Christmas Seasons we enjoy experiencing the nativity stories of Jesus, and we hear and sing songs of peace, hope, joy and love. It is a time when we gather among friends and family for laughter and celebration. It is a season that can flood our hearts with a number of emotions. And for a little while, everyone seems to be on their best behavior. Then as we slide into Epiphany, the tree comes down, the ornaments return to boxes for another year, the Christmas cards are put away or recycled. We plan out our resolutions in an attempt to make this new year something special. And for a while, we still catch ourselves believing in a world of silent nights and heavenly peace.

And then reality sets back in. The story from Matthew’s gospel awakens us from our reverie. We check the news, and we see devastating pictures of coming out of Australia, where bush fires have decimated 12 million acres of land, destroying homes and killing millions of animals with no sign of stopping. We take in the news of the assassination of an Iranian general, and wonder if this will be the start of a new war in the middle east.

The reality of our world breaks into the nativity scene. And Matthew’s story quickly 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 exposes the brutality of King Herod and identifies the frightened family of Joseph, Mary and baby Jesus as refugees, as they flee Bethlehem and head to Egypt. We would much rather skip over this part of the nativity story. No one wants to think about soldiers killing innocent babies nor to imagine the holy family forced to run for their lives. The birth of Jesus was not a message of good news to everyone. To the rulers and powers of this world, the birth of Jesus signaled change in the status quo. 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 to let Herod know the location of the baby king, Herod lashed out on all the families there. Without hesitation, he ordered his men to slaughter babies.

Now, Herod wasn’t a raving madman. But he was a shrewd political leader. His willingness to work within the parameters of the Roman overlords allowed him to hold power in Judea, to be made king despite his commoner lineage. He brought order to a region that had suffered conflict for two centuries. He was known for his building projects, safe roads, and fair taxes. He encouraged the spread of Greek culture in the region, his loyalty to Rome allowed for Judaism to be a recognized religion, and he rebuilt the Jerusalem Temple, an architectural marvel. But Herod understood the realities of the world, and the place of people in it. If the common, uneducated people believed the Messiah had been born...well, that would

complicate things. It was better to kill a few dozen babies in a backwater village than to risk political upheaval. To him, their pathetic lives meant nothing. And besides, no foreign astrologers were going to make a mockery out of him. (*The Drama of Christmas*, Morton Kelsey, p.67-68, 1994)

For the original audience of Matthew's Gospel, the elements of this story would have resonated with their historical memory. In fact, throughout the gospel, Matthew will specifically show how the good news of Jesus was the fulfillment of God's promises of redemption. Matthew's gospel highlights the connections between Jesus and Israel's history, knowing his readers would easily make that connection.

The characters and setting of this story are important – there is a fearful, angry ruler who gives the order to slaughter a bunch of babies, and one of those babies manages to escape when his family flees to Egypt. Now – think Old Testament story – Egypt, angry ruler killing babies, one escapes. In Exodus we have the story of an Egyptian Pharaoh who was concerned that there were too many Hebrew slaves. Afraid their growing numbers might lead to revolt, he ordered the drowning of male Hebrew babies in the Nile River to control their population. But one woman hid her child for a few months, then she put him in a basket on the river. That 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, Jesus 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.

Herod's mindset is not surprising. To those in power, the lives and struggles of the masses mean little or nothing. Systems are put into place to keep people compliant and make sure that the powerful stay in power. Any threat to that power is squashed. But Israel's God has always been a friend to the poor and the marginalized, and when Jesus came into the world, the powerful had good reason to be afraid.

Today's lesson from Matthew's gospel is difficult for us to hear. We don't like to have our image of the nativity 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 to flee from their homes on a grand scale. Where children are exploited and abused. And homeless are ignored and the aged are forgotten.

We don't like to be reminded that the systems that keep us cozy and secure in our heated homes are the same systems that allow tainted water to still flow out that taps of poor

households in Flint, Michigan. We don't like to be made aware that the structures that give privileged children in wealthy neighborhoods excellent schools, allow the schools in inner city neighborhoods to have run-down classrooms and few resources. We would rather not know that the local governments that provide nice parks and decent roads and holiday parades are the same ones that ignore the problems behind homelessness and substance abuse.

We don't want to hear these stories. They make us uncomfortable. Especially at this time of year – the tail end of the holiday season. But these are the reasons that God choose to take on human flesh and dwell among us. This is the world into which the savior came. Jesus came to bring good news to the poor and the oppressed, to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and restore sight to the blind. Jesus came to bring down the powerful and disrupt the systems that promote inequality. And Jesus came to awaken those who are comfortable to the needs of all God's people.

Into a world in need of redemption...yes, into this very world, Jesus has come. May he find his home among us and may we be receptive to his call.