

## **“Mary, Joseph and Jesus – Refugees”**

### **Matthew 2:1-18**

John 10:20 tells us that many Jews thought Jesus was “demon possessed and raving mad”.

This opinion was immediately challenged by others who said in verse 21, “These are not the saying of a man possessed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?”

Some thought Jesus was crazy but he was neither paranoid nor irrational. He rightfully understood there were some very real dangers around him. He spoke clearly and powerfully with absolutely amazing insights into human nature. Jesus had deep relationships with a wide variety of people from different walks of life.

Jesus was loving but didn't let his compassion immobilize him; he didn't have a bloated ego even though he was often surrounded by adoring crowds; he maintained balance despite an often demanding lifestyle; he always knew what he was doing and where he was going; he cared deeply about people, especially women and children, who weren't seen as being important back then; and he responded to people based on where they were at and what they uniquely needed.

Jesus was accused of being crazy because he spent time with, listened to, and sometimes healed people whom people thought were crazy. When Jesus came upon one crazy man, he sent his demons into the pigs and the pigs ran off the cliff.

Right in the middle of Matthew's version of the Christmas story comes a shock. It is disturbing, terrifying, and horrific. And it is essential to understanding the adventure and mission of Jesus. When Jesus was born, a crazy man was the ruler.

King Herod, or Herod the Great, ruled over Judea in the years leading up to Jesus' birth. Although he rebuilt the Temple in Jerusalem — a sign of his Jewish identity — he was a puppet king who also depended on the Roman Empire for his status. He was, like many biblical characters — and like many of us, too — a man with an identity crisis. Cruel and ruthless, he used slave labor for his huge building projects. He had a reputation for assassinating anyone he considered a threat — including his wife and two of his own sons. Late in his reign, he began hearing rumors . . . rumors that the long-awaited liberator prophesied by Isaiah and others had been born. While a pious man might have greeted this news with hope and joy, Herod only saw it as a threat — a threat to political stability and to his own status as king.

In recent years, there had been a lot of resistance, unrest, and revolt in Jerusalem, so Rome wasn't in a tolerant frame of mind. Any talk of rebellion, Herod knew, would bring crushing retaliation against the city. So Herod inquired of the religious scholars to find out if the holy texts gave any indication of where this long-anticipated child would be born. Their answer came from the Book of Micah: Bethlehem.

Herod did what any desperate, ruthless dictator would do. First, he tried to enlist some foreign mystics, known to us as "the wise men from the East". He wanted them to be his spies to help him discover the child's identity and whereabouts so he could have the child killed. But the wise men were warned of his deceit in a dream and so avoided becoming his unwitting accomplices. Realizing that his "Plan A" had failed, Herod launched "Plan B". He sent his henchmen to find and kill any young boy living in the area of Bethlehem.

But the particular boy he sought had already been removed from Bethlehem and taken

elsewhere.

The result? A slaughter of innocent children in Bethlehem. As is the case with many biblical stories, some scholars doubt this mass slaughter occurred, since none is recorded in other histories of the time. Others argue that Bethlehem was a small town, so the total number of casualties may have been twenty or thirty. Dictators certainly have their ways of keeping atrocities secret — just as they have their ways of making their exploits known. Whatever the infant death count in Bethlehem, we know Herod killed some of his own children when they became a threat to his agenda. So even if the story has been exaggerated to some degree, there is a deeper truth that has much to say to us today.

In his slaughter of innocent children, King Herod has now emulated the horrible behavior of Pharaoh centuries before, in the days of Moses. A descendant of the slaves has behaved like the ancient slave master. The story of Herod tells us once again that the world can't be simply divided between the good guys — *us* — and the bad guys — *them* — because like Herod, members of *us* will behave no differently from *them*, given the power and provocation. So all people face the same profound questions: *How will we manage power? How will we deal with violence?*

Herod — and Pharaoh before him — model one way: violence is simply one tool, used in varying degrees, to gain or maintain power.

The baby whom Herod seeks to kill will model another way. His tool will be service, not violence.

And his goal will not be gaining and maintaining power, but using his power to heal and empower others. He will reveal a vision of God that is reflected more in the

vulnerability of children than in the violence of men, more in the caring of mothers than in the cruelty of kings.

All this can sound quite abstract and theoretical unless we go one step deeper. The war being waged now by Assad and Putin in Syria, by Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, by Bush, Obama, and now Trump in Iraq, and others resembles every war in the past. It is planned by powerful older men in their comfortable offices, and it is fought on the ground by people the age of their children and grandchildren. Most of the casualties are between eighteen and twenty-two years old — in some places, much younger. So the old, sad music of the ancient story of Herod and the slaughter of the children is replayed again. And again, the tears of mothers will fall.

The sacrifice of children for the well-being and security of adults has a long history among human beings. For example, in the ancient Middle East there was a religion dedicated to an idol named Molech. Faithful adherents would sacrifice infants to Molech every year, a horrible display of twisted religiosity to appease their god's wrath and earn his favor. In contrast, beginning with the story of Abraham and Isaac, we gradually discover that the true God doesn't require appeasement at all. In fact, God exemplifies true, loving, mature parenthood . . . self-giving for the sake of one's children, not sacrificing children for one's own selfish interests.

This is why it matters so much for us to grapple with what we believe about God. Does God promote or demand violence? Does God favor the sacrifice of children for the

well-being of adults? Is God best reflected in the image of powerful old men who send the young and vulnerable to die on their behalf? Or is God best seen in the image of a helpless baby, identifying with the victims, sharing their vulnerability, full of fragile but limitless promise?

We do not live in an ideal world. To be alive in the adventure of Jesus is to face at every turn the destructive reality of violence. To be alive in the adventure of Jesus is to side with vulnerable children in defiance of the adults who see them as expendable. To walk the road with Jesus is to withhold consent and cooperation from the powerful, and to invest it instead with the vulnerable. It is to refuse to bow to all the Herod's and all their ruthless regimes – and to reserve our loyalty for a better king and a better kingdom.

Jesus has truly come, but each year during the Christmas season, we acknowledge that the dream which he gave his all has not yet fully come true. As long as elites plot violence, as long as dictators like Assad in Syria plot violence to stay in power, as long as religious zealots like Al Qaeda plot violence to get power, as long as children pay the price, and as long as mothers weep, we cannot be satisfied.

We cannot be satisfied when anyone can get on the internet and be brainwashed by Neo-Nazis, the KKK, or any cult leader to believe that killing people is pleasing to God.

We cannot be satisfied when almost anyone can legally purchase an assault rifle whose only purpose is to kill many people quickly. As the Neo-Nazi did during worship in the Pittsburg synagogue. I have an arsenal of guns locked away that I inherited from my father. My father and I have never and will never own an assault rifle. We cannot be

satisfied until we get cult leaders off the internet and stop selling assault rifles.

So we have lit a candle for the children who suffer in our world because of greedy, power-hungry, and insecure men. We light a candle for grieving mothers who weep for lost sons and daughters, throughout history and today. We light a candle for all people everywhere to hear their weeping, especially in Pittsburg . . . In this Christmas season, we dare to believe that God feels their pain and comes near to bring comfort. If we believe that is true, then of course we must join God and come near, too. That is why we must keep Herod and the ugliness of his mass murder in the beautiful Christmas story.

May the peace of God . . .

#250 – Blessed be the God of Israel