

## "Take the Child and Flee"

King Herod was familiar with the eastern custom of paying homage to kings and rulers. Paying homage meant a public show of respect and honor for someone. People would come and pay homage to him for his achievements; he did the same for other notable people.

It wasn't strange then when a caravan of travelers arrived from the east, presumably to pay homage to someone. But it wasn't for *him*! These were Magi (probably Persian astrologers). Herod got word of their arrival, and that they were looking for someone who had just been born "king of the Jews"! *Any king would be worried about a report that a child was born who would occupy a throne!*

So, somewhat in a panic, he consulted with the Jewish chief priests and scribes if there were any prophecies regarding a king of the Jews – a Messiah, or "anointed one". And if so, where would this special person be born? Sure enough, he was told that the prophet Micah said *Bethlehem* would be the birthplace of this Messiah, One whom God would anoint to be ruler of the Jews.

Herod was sick in those days. He was aged, and his health was deteriorating. Yet he invited them to his palace. As the Magi arrived, Herod tried to be cordial. "When did you see this birthing star?" "Well," Herod said, "the Jewish leaders have told me that this little king whom you seek is likely to have been born in Bethlehem. It's not far from here. Why don't you go and search for the child, and when you've found him, let me know where he is, that I too may go and worship him." (We know, of course, Herod didn't want to *worship* him. He wanted to *kill* him).

The Magi (the Wise Men) found the child Jesus. Since it took them a number of months to get to Bethlehem, Jesus would have been by now perhaps 18 months old. But God warned them in a dream not to return to Herod. And Joseph was warned in a dream to take the child Jesus and flee to Egypt. Matthew continues the narrative: "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'" (Matthew 2:16-18).

*Herod is certainly capable of doing that.* He was called Herod the Great, and in a number of ways he deserved the title. He had a long and productive reign. He was a great builder. He could be generous with the people. But he had one major character flaw: *he was insanely suspicious.* If he suspected anyone as a rival to his power, that person was promptly eliminated!

While Herod could boast of some outstanding achievements, his reign overall has been described as one of bitter hatred, suspicion, and terrible atrocities. No man or woman was safe while Herod reigned. One by one, he murdered every rival to the throne. He married 10 times, and his favorite wife was a beautiful Jewish princess named Mariamne. At one point he thought she was having an affair, so he executed her, and also murdered both of her sons. He murdered one wife's 17 year-old brother, because he was popular with the Jews. Five days before Herod's death he also murdered his own son and heir. He wound up executing 3 of his 14 children.

When the Roman Emperor Augustus heard of the execution of Herod's eldest son Antipater in 4 BC, he made his famous comment - that it would be preferable to be Herod's pig (Hus) than his son (huios). Herod hacked his way through life, slaughtering thousands of people. So, yes, it was not out of character for him to execute all children two years old and under in and around Bethlehem.

*Smack in the middle of the beautiful Christmas narrative is this ghastly execution of babies in Bethlehem. It's part of Matthew's Christmas narrative: Roman soldiers breaking into houses in Bethlehem, with their swords, grabbing toddlers. Mothers in panic, children screaming, and Jesus and His family fleeing for their life. All because of one man's insane jealousy and lust for power. I mean, this is a real downer after a lovely Christmas Eve candlelight service, and happy Christmas day activities! But isn't this still the world in which we live?*

Let's take just a few minutes to reflect on how this part of the Christmas story reflects life today. *Before Jesus is 2 years old, someone wants Him out of the way!*

***The truth is, some people still want Jesus and His followers out of the way.*** According to a 2021 World Watch List report, over 340 million Christians are living in places where they experience high levels of persecution and discrimination. 1 out of every 8 Christians "live in a country where they suffer some form of persecution, such as arbitrary arrest, violence, a full range of human rights violations, and even death." 4,761 Christians have been killed for their faith – a 60% increase over the past year. 4,488 churches and other Christian buildings have been attacked.

Christians in numerous countries in Africa and Asia have been refused Covid-related aid. In Kaduna, Nigeria, families from several villages reported receiving one-sixth of the rations allocated to Muslim families. The number of Christians killed in Nigeria has nearly tripled to 3,000 recorded deaths.

In China, the government has increased surveillance, with facial recognition systems installed in state-approved churches in some areas and online services monitored. Crosses and other Christian imagery have been replaced with pictures of President Xi Jinping and national flags.

In India, the Hindu nationalist government has fostered a climate in which attacks and harassment of Christians and Muslims have increased. Foreign funding of Christian-run hospitals, schools and church organizations has been blocked.

*What can we do?* Pray for persecuted Christians. Become more informed. Just Google "persecution of Christians" and you will find up to date information regarding persecution of Christians and the church. Support organizations like *Voice of the Martyrs*, as they reach out with aid to embattled Christians around the world. I regularly receive printed information from this organization that relates personal accounts of Christians' courageous responses to persecution. This puts a name and a face on the statistics.

And remember Jesus promises to those who suffer for His names' sake: "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matthew 5:10-12).

We can see something else in our Scripture text for today: ***There is the contrast between two kings.*** One king, King Herod, has a lust to control people and get his own way, an insatiable jealousy and suspicion that drives him to murder people – even infants. The other king, Jesus, came in humility, not to *be* served but to serve (Mark 10:42-45), not killing others (as Herod), but even allowing Himself to *be killed* for our sins.

Isn't there something of each of these kings in us? The one side of us wanting to be good and kind and thoughtful and forgiving. But the King Herod part of our nature that wants to get our own way, control others, envy them for what they have, or get even with them for what they do to us.

For followers of Jesus, our inner spirit is a battleground for these two natures and these two kings vying for control. The Apostle Paul talked about this inner warfare in his letter to the Galatians. He said it's a battle between "the flesh" and "the Spirit." The "flesh" is our unconverted nature; the "spirit" is the Holy Spirit who lives in us if we're believers. It's when we yield ourselves over to the Holy Spirit, and seek His presence and guidance, that the King Jesus nature begins to control. When King Jesus rules in us, the "fruit of the Spirit" will be evident in us: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

The world, too, is a battleground for these 2 Kings – Herod and Jesus, good and evil. By the way, which King wins in the long run? Not King Herod, but King Jesus! While the King Herod tyrants of the world are dead and rotting in their graves, or burned to ashes, King Jesus *lives*, and is still King of kings and Lord of lords!

One more thought on this rather disturbing Scripture: ***Jesus' family fleeing to Egypt is a reminder of the deliverance God offers all who trust Him.***

God wanted to protect His Son from Herod, so God spoke to Joseph in a dream. God tells Joseph to take his family where? *To Egypt!* Remember Egypt? Where God's people were held in slavery for 400 years? Isn't it ironic that God tells Joseph to flee to the very country his ancestors had to *flee from* for their safety!

Look at what happens next: "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. 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. 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'" (Matthew 2:19-23). *Notice God's guiding hand of protection. Even detouring them from Judea to the village of Nazareth.*

***It was a dangerous, scary time for the Holy Family, and it's a dangerous, scary time for us.***

If you like to worry, there's plenty to worry about: the relentless threat of COVID, the Russians massive building up of troops and armor on the border of the Ukraine. China. North Korea. Plus more personal concerns: inflation, rising prices, our health, etc. etc.

*But God's guiding hand of protection is still available to us.* No, not a guarantee that bad things won't happen, or that we won't have to go through some awful times, but the promise of God's *presence* and *sustaining power* whatever we may face. God doesn't always protect us *from* trials, but God protects *in* the trials.

There are so many wonderful promises in the Bible of God's gracious presence and help no matter what life may throw at us! Here are some of my favorite verses that remind us of this:

Psalm 27:1, 5: "The Lord is my light and my salvation – whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life – of whom shall I be afraid? For in the day of trouble he will keep me safe in his dwelling; he will hide me in the shelter of his sacred tent and set me high upon a rock."

Psalm 46:1: "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble."

Psalm 91:1-4a: " You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, will say to the LORD, 'My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust.' For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence; he will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge."

Isaiah 43:1-4: "But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior...because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you....".

Hebrews 13:6: "So we say with confidence, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?'"

Jesus' own words of promise: "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

The story of the slaughter of the innocent children is a horrible story, and can easily cast a shadow over the glow of Christmas and the miracle of Jesus' birth. But Matthew relates the event as part of Jesus' birth narrative.

Doesn't it remind us that after the Christmas holidays we do indeed need to re-enter the real world with all of its challenges and hardships. But we don't have to be alone: the God of Christmas, the Christ of Christmas, the Spirit of Christmas is with us!

And now it's "back to work", to let the Christmas story in some way make a difference in us, and how we face the world with its challenges.

Howard Thurman has said, "When the song of the angels is stilled, when the star in the sky is gone, when the kings and princes are home, when the shepherds are back with their flocks, then the real work of Christmas begins."

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