

**THE FLIGHT TO EGYPT; MATTHEW 2:13-23; CHRISTMAS I, DECEMBER 29, 3019;  
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As I mentioned last week, Matthew's account of Advent and Christmas is the polar opposite of what we have made, in our secular culture, of the origin of our faith. It's not a Hallmark feel good flick; but rather, the way Matthew tells it – a Wild West good guy, bad guy epic, and at times quite dark.

We get an ominous indication we are headed into the badlands at the start of Advent when John the Baptist proclaims that justice will be served and a savior king will be born; then Herod the outlaw king stops at nothing to quell his paranoia and feed his narcissism – he kills John in a gruesome, sadistic display of his power as only a megalomaniacal psychopath has the capacity to do.

Which brings us to this morning; just days after the birth of the Christ Child, the holy family is on their way to Egypt thanks to another dream Joseph has, this one warning them to leave Palestine because Herod is in search of their child and intends to do him harm. Jesus and his parents manage to escape; but Herod, beside himself with rage when he realizes the wise men tricked him, sends troops to Bethlehem to slay all the male children under the age of two; it is a clumsy horrific ploy to eradicate the one whom Herod correctly assesses is his competition, but whose demise will not occur until he, the Messiah, is a grown adult and freely, consciously gives his life up for the final defeat of the dark powers.

These are not the sort of events that lend themselves to greeting cards or feature length films shot in Disneyesque, snow-covered New England towns adorned with wreaths, mistletoe and cheerful people on every corner. In fact, the slaughter of the innocents, as today's reading is accurately known, was removed from the lectionary precisely because of its blatantly violent and morally repugnant plot.

But the story has been re-instated for good reason. Scholars distinguish between historical record and the biblical narrative as a confession of faith. This story, they say, is not historically verified, though Herod was certainly capable of such a crime. But the value of violent biblical stories like this, as a famous child psychologist said of fairy tales in which the hero vanquishes the villain, is that they remind us of a vanquishing God who ultimately conquers the dark forces that grip our lives with fear and render us hopeless.

I am not saying the biblical story is a fairy tale but like a fairy tale; and also that it helps us cope by seeing ourselves not as innocent or indifferent by-standers but as partners with this God in the fight against evil. And it is in this allegiance that we discover who we are and why we are here.

The scope of the bible is bigger and more encompassing than the lessons of literature or theories of human development.

Apart from the explanations of science, the bible accounts for the emergence of the cosmos and the appearance of human life as divinely intended acts.

But then it goes beyond even these metaphysical markers. The bible offers an explanation of the world we live in and the suffering associated with it; and finally this—what could only be described as the utterly unexpected response to and remedy for our suffering in the life and teachings of a first century peasant rabbi, perceived by his tiny following as the Messiah.

First, an observation before we consider today's story. There is no doubt that the world we know and that our ancestors knew in the first century or for centuries before that has changed little in the sense that humans have a remarkable capacity to be both magnanimous and heroic on the one hand and fearful and protective on the other hand.

This later tendency when combined with power and authority has turned inward upon the human family itself like an immune system gone berserk that starts to attack the body. When it appears in this form, it seems to have a life of its own that infects or consumes whole nations.

Herod and his regime is an illustration of what can happen to any nation or people who become fixated on preserving their dominance over others. We've witnessed this manifestation of evil through history and recently in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Germany, Russia and Asia, and in this century in Africa and the Middle East. Genocide is not restricted to any nation or century.

Now today's story. Whereas in the only other nativity account in Luke, the Christ child is born for the poor and oppressed, Matthew's infant savior enters the world to reach out to all the nations. Matthew makes this clear to his Jewish audience when another dream leads Joseph and his family back from Egypt but not to Jerusalem where danger still lurks for the child, but to Nazareth in Galilee – the land of gentiles.

The plot and scope of Matthew couldn't be any larger or more encompassing. It is a book for people of all places and all times.

Each of the gospels tells the story of Jesus differently; we read them for the unique contributions they make. They have their power in messages aimed at particular people in particular circumstances. And on any given Sunday we are those people. Together they convey the fullness and meaning of Jesus whose name means "God helps" and his other name, Emmanuel, which is "God with us."

As we narrow the focus, the implications of today's story are timely. It is clear that had Jesus and his family not fled to Egypt and become refugees like refugees today where undocumented aliens line our southern borders and the borders of European nations, Herod would certainly have hijacked God's plan of salvation for the ages.

If nothing else this ought to help us see and appreciate that our own spiritual ancestors were once alien, undocumented, refugees in Egypt much like refugees today who fled their homes to save their lives.

The point is that all of us here are naturalized citizens when it comes to the kingdom of God. Which is to say that when those who are different from us because of their language, appearance, place of birth, or economic condition ask us to protect and receive them, Christians have one default position: hospitality. We are partial to hospitality toward those in need, because that's the way a pagan, nonbelieving nation treated the Holy Family and that's the way God in Christ treated us and commanded us to treat others. By all means, there can and should be debate about what policies best enable us to receive and assimilate immigrants but the bottom line is that hospitality is not to be used as a bargaining chip or taken away as a disincentive for poor and oppressed people seeking sanctuary. Certainly, the brutal treatment of children at the border has no place in the policies of the richest nation on earth which those who propose and support such policies still regard as a Christian nation.

In Matthew's account of Jesus' life God is the actor in the unfolding story from his birth to his execution on a cross. God sends the angel to tell Mary she will have a baby who will be the savior not only of his people but of all nations; God sends an angel to redirect Joseph's decision to quietly end his betrothal to Mary and accept her as his wife; and God sends an angel to protect the young family from the murderous aims of Herod and then lead them back to safety in Galilee.

We can read today's story as the story of a close call by Jesus' family as they escape destruction by a crazed ruler or we can read it as the overarching, ongoing work of the God who brought the stars and planets and humans into being. And finally, a God who influences the relationship of a first century couple who give birth to a son in obscurity and who becomes light and peace and healing to a world that walks in darkness and fear and brokenness.

The story today is a meta-narrative whose trajectory ends where you and I are sitting in this sanctuary. There is no other purpose Matthew entertains for his account; it is not to be sold for movie rights, or turned into a best seller; or made the subject of intensive literary and historical research. All of those things have happened but they are not what Matthew was trying to accomplish or tell us.

The real purpose of Matthew's story is to convince, persuade, remind, and nudge you and me to worship this child born to be king because it is you and me he comes to save and you and me he calls to be not afraid of anything in this life but to trust that his power that is released in us when we lift up our hearts and worship him.

That's about as good as good news gets. And it's something, thank goodness, people who've heard it cannot keep to themselves but are moved to share it, live it, be it, even at the cost of their own hurt or suffering, for those who still dwell in fear without hope.

Here's the story one more time: light was coming into the world and the darkness has not overcome it. Amen.