

Christmas, and then this Mess?

Matthew 2:1-18

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

3 When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. 4 When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. 5 "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

6 "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel."

7 Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. 8 He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

9 After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. 11 On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

13 When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him."

14 So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, 15 where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son."

16 When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. 17 Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:

18 "A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more."

One of the saddest events recorded in the Bible is a Christmas event! The Christian Church memorializes it tomorrow, December 28th, the slaughter of the infants of Bethlehem. But we might wonder why? It's only an epilog to the beautiful account of the Christmas magi, the wise men, and there are much larger and more terrifying slaughters recorded in the Bible. Think of the Egyptian army helpless and drowning in the Red Sea. Think of God's judgment on

the Canaanites who inhabited the Promised Land when the Israelites arrived--the Lord commanded that they be killed or enslaved, everyone, young and old, men, women, and children. By comparison, Bethlehem was a small town, and the infants and toddlers, two and under, experts agree would have numbered probably 50 or fewer. That's only 1/4 the number of people who were murdered in just the city of Milwaukee this year!

So why would this minor slaughter draw so much attention that dozens of artists **[slaughter pic]** memorialize it, and December 28th be set aside by the Christian Church as the Festival of the Holy Innocents? We might like to dismiss it as a lot of drama. But these artists weren't just showing off their talents by painting so many people in deep emotions and bloodshed; they were capturing a very dramatic, religious moment. And the victims were children under two years of age, infants and toddlers. They were helpless before Herod's soldiers; they had done nothing to deserve death; they had done absolutely nothing to threaten Herod's kingship. They died because of their connection to Jesus.

So how did this tragedy take place? I guess the first thing we should do is clear up a little misleading information, the name of this festival. The Bible does not call the children of Bethlehem either holy or innocent--no one is. 3 weeks ago Prof. Bivens gave us the sad news that in this sinful and broken world every human being is sinful from birth. It's like a disease we all inherit! And death is the proof of our universal lack of innocence. Romans 5:12 tells us, **"Death came to all people because all sinned."** So all tragedies and every death occur because sin is universal. But there was one specific sinful human being and specific sin that brought about the slaughter of the children of Bethlehem.

The perpetrator was King Herod the Great, **[Herod pic]** who ruled Palestine for over 30 years. He was a very capable leader and politician, who had received his kingship from the Roman Senate, and did everything in his power to keep it. Though he was not a Jew by birth, he was raised in the Jewish faith, and he made every effort to win the support of his Jewish subjects. He rebuilt the Temple in Jerusalem, for his second wife he married the daughter of the most prominent Jewish ruling family, the Hasmoneans, and for his third wife married the daughter of the high priest. During a drought and famine, he sold the furnishings from his palace to buy food and clothing for his people. And he made every effort to ensure that his rule would be long and secure. So when he first became king, he sent out his troops to eliminate guerilla fighters and uprisings. And as his reign progressed he thoroughly eliminated any threat to his kingship, including his 2nd wife and her grandfather, 3 sons, and a few other relatives, as well. I'm sure Herod thought that this was good for the country, because it's better to have peace than rebellion.

So it is easy to predict how Herod would react when foreign dignitaries arrived in his capitol city Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him (Mt 2:2)." Matthew goes on to tell us: "When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him." In the centuries before Herod, Palestine was plagued with foreign invasions and local uprisings, so a rival king had to be dealt with quickly, so Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

But God gave a warning to the Magi to return to their country by another route, and when they did not return to Jerusalem, Herod determined to resolve the matter in the most thorough way.

“When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.” And so we have the slaughter of the infants of Bethlehem.

The sin is called infanticide. It was not practiced at all among the Jews, who understood from God’s Word that children are a gift and blessing from the Lord. But it was a common practice among the pagan Greeks and Romans. Historians tell us, “Greeks regularly practiced infanticide as a kind of birth control, particularly in Sparta, while the Roman father had the right not to lift his baby off the floor after birth, letting it die.” To a different extent children are also devalued and disposed of in our modern world as well. Not because God hasn’t given the gift of a child, but simply by choice, some couples choose not to have children; mistaking God’s blessing of children as a burden or simply unnecessary. And the 800 pound gorilla in the room is the practice of abortion, in which God’s blessing is first devalued to being an unnecessary part of a woman’s body that might be surgically removed, and then disposed of through abortion. Thank God the number of abortions in American has steadily decreased since it was legalized 40 years ago. Still 800,000 infant lives, in the womb, are taken every year. It makes the slaughter at Bethlehem seem like a minor thing.

But let’s get off that point, because it’s a place where it’s so easy to point fingers at others before I notice that there are 3 fingers pointing right back at me. The reality is that there’s a common sin behind all these tragedies, a common spiritual crisis which affects every one of us. A person who does not trust and serve Christ can only trust and serve the selfish sinful nature. And so we have King Herod who thought, “No one’s interests are more important than mine. I’m the king after all, and what’s good for the king has to be good for the people.” And because he was king, he could get away with it. And Satan uses the fact that we can escape human condemnation to embolden our sin! Abortion is legal, pornography is legal, drunkenness is legal with a designated driver, despising the immigrant is legal, ignoring the poor, helpless, lonely and sick is legal. The bottom line is that shutting God’s will out of your life is legal, and even Christians who have a new nature still have the old, selfish sinful nature which will lead you and me to slaughter the helpless if we don’t realize the deadly danger and repent! When I repent I literally “change my mind” about my own goodness and accept the Lord’s perfect grace and goodness.

We honor this day because the children of Bethlehem died because of their connection to Christ, who would make the perfect, selfless sacrifice for us all. The book of Hebrews describes it so dramatically: **When Christ came into the world, he said: “Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased. Then I said, ‘Here I am—it is written about me in the scroll—I have come to do your will, my God (He 10:5-7).”** And miraculously that selfless Savior was born as one of us. And then, when only a toddler, when selfish human beings tried to snuff out his life, he didn’t give up and head back to heaven. In fact, he never held back. As Pastor Ben told us, Christmas always leads to the cross! The Lord didn’t give up on Herod and his family. He spoke to Herod and his family through his prophets. He even appeared before Herod’s son on Good Friday before he died. He knows my selfish nature, too; my inclinations to think of someone as “not my kind of people,” to think of someone as too far gone, too much bother, even beyond redemption. And he unselfishly calls me to know his unselfish love.

Please don't get this wrong. Jesus is your example and mine--let's confront our selfish natures! But don't accept him as your example until you first accept him as your Savior. What a mess our world can be, what a mess you and I can be, even at Christmas! But nothing changes selfish human hearts except the gospel of the incomparably unselfish Savior. Our response and our motivation is summed up perfectly by the apostle Paul: We have **"the surpassing grace God has given...Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!"** Amen.