

The Holy Innocents – Matthew 2:13-18

Today is December 28 – just the third day since Christmas – a commemoration of what is often called “The Slaughter of the Innocents,” the killing of the baby boys of Bethlehem by King Herod.

The Church’s regard for this day as a feast day is quite early, going back to at least the fifth century. In the fourth century, Chromatius described these babies as the first martyrs of Christ – the first counted worthy to die on Christ’s behalf. Around the same time, St. Augustine claimed that these nameless victims, “whom Herod’s cruelty tore as sucklings from their mothers’ bosom are justly hailed as the infant martyr flowers, the first buds of the church killed by the frost of persecution. They died not only for Christ but in his stead.”

What if we knew the names of the victims of Herod's infamous, paranoid rage?
What if the cries of Bethlehem took place today in Birmingham?

For Samuel Acton...
For Ezekiel Bacon...
For Jager Bruce...
For Luke DeBoer...
For Frank Dixon...
For Charlie Piretti...
For Cohen Smith...

May it never, ever be.

But what if such a tragedy took place inside our community?

Bright young lives, cut short by darkness.

A deafening silence replaces the cries of the young.

The tears of the parents a lingering reminder of the tears of their lost children.

May it never, ever be.

But it has been... and it frequently is... true.

The small and the young are slaughtered by the big and supposedly powerful:

- The Hebrew babies, by Pharaoh.
- Bethlehem’s young, by Herod.

- Babies not yet born, by their parents.
- Babies already born, by their parents.
- Sandy Hook Elementary students, by Adam Lanza.
- Students in Peshawar, by the Pakistani Taliban.
- Pakistani children, by U.S. drone strikes.
- Central American children, by gangs and drug lords...

May it never, ever be?

Lord, have mercy! Lord Jesus, come quickly!

For these things so often ARE.

You do not have to look far to spot evil.

You do not have to look much further to spot violence that victimizes children.

This is not an ancient Egyptian or Judean issue,
it is an issue for TODAY.

An issue for ETERNITY.

If it is not happening today in our community,
it IS happening right now in some community.

Consider this, today, as we commemorate the "Holy Innocents" of Bethlehem
-- nameless to us,
but called by name by both their parents and their God --

Consider this, today, as we contemplate **how the Incarnation unveils both the source of and the desperate need for hope...**
the brilliant light of Christ against the dark backdrop
of intense evil and incomprehensible suffering.

Let us pray...

*O ALMIGHTY God, who out of the mouths of babes and sucklings hast ordained strength,
and madest infants to glorify thee by their deaths:
Mortify and kill all vices in us, and so strengthen us by thy grace,*

*that by the innocency of our lives, and constancy of our faith even unto death,
we may glorify thy holy Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*
(BCP, 1928)

I've said that the Incarnation unveils both the source of and the desperate need for hope.

Let us consider both together as we turn to today's Gospel text, Matthew 2:13-18.
(ON PAGE _____.)

The structure of this passage is easy enough to ascertain.

- It begins, in vv. 13-15, by depicting the flight of Joseph, Mary, and Jesus from Bethlehem to Egypt – concluding in v. 15 with a quotation from Hosea 11:1.
- Then, in vv. 16-18, we witness the grisly scene at Bethlehem, which is then linked by Matthew to a quotation from Jeremiah 31:15.
- Although this sermon will only address these 6 verses, vv.19-23 complete the symmetry of these events by depicting the return of the family from Egypt to Nazareth in Galilee.

First, then:

**I. IN TELLING OF THE FLIGHT TO EGYPT,
VV. 13-15 PORTRAY JESUS AS THE NEW MOSES, THE TRUE ISRAEL,
AND THE SOURCE OF HOPE.**

¹³Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him."

*¹⁴And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt ¹⁵and remained there until the death of Herod.
This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet,
"Out of Egypt I called my son."*

A. The Flight

Verse 13 begins by referring to the departure of the wise men, after offering their now-famous gifts. And just as they were warned in a dream to take an alternate route home to avoid Herod, so Joseph is commanded in a dream by a messenger of the Lord to flee to Egypt to avoid Herod.

Herod the Great's attempts to destroy the Christ-child here echo the much earlier attempts of Pharaoh to kill Moses in the book of Exodus – first, generally and unwittingly, by ordering all Hebrew baby boys to be cast into the Nile (Exod. 1:22); and then, even more specifically, when Pharaoh tried to kill Moses after Moses' had murdered a nameless Egyptian (Exod. 2:15). In this way, Matthew links Herod with Pharaoh, and Jesus with Moses.

Therefore, although Egypt was, in the immediate sense, a natural destination to escape Herod's jurisdiction, Matthew is drawing deeper connections. Egypt was the house of slavery from which the nation of Israel was redeemed. It is significant, then, that the Son of God goes there as a refugee before returning to the land of Israel to redeem the world.

The urgency of the angel's command matches the urgency with which it was obeyed. The family made the approximately 90 mile journey, beginning under cover of darkness. And they obediently remained there until receiving further instructions - until Herod would later die, allowing them to return and to journey to Nazareth in Galilee.

B. The Fulfillment

And then Matthew says that these things happened in order that that which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet – in this case, the prophet Hosea – might be fulfilled: “Out of Egypt I called my son.” As I have mentioned, this comes from Hosea 11, from a beautiful prophetic passage which begins by speaking of Israel and the Exodus – the formative event in the birth of the young nation, the young “son” of God.

This way of speaking about Israel as God’s son comes from the book of Exodus itself, when Moses is told to tell Pharaoh *“Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son, and I say to you ‘Let my son go that he may serve me’ (4:22-23a).*

This is a metaphorical use of the word “son” to refer to the relationship between Yahweh and his people. However, as the Exodus passage continues, if Pharaoh refused to let Yahweh’s metaphorical firstborn son go, Yahweh would kill Pharaoh’s literal firstborn son.

Literal and metaphorical sonship collide in the person of Jesus Christ. He is the Son of God who fully shares the divine nature of his Father, and he is also the Son of God who fulfills the calling and the destiny of the nation of Israel.

Here his sojourn in Egypt fulfills the Exodus. Later, in Matthew 4, his wilderness temptation fulfills the Old Testament wilderness wanderings.

Jesus is not just the New Moses. He is the True Israel.

Only when divine sonship is seen as an important biblical theme does this Hosea quotation make sense. Matthew is not proof-texting here, because in the Hosea passage, the “son” immediately turns away from Yahweh to idolatry in the very next verse!

Instead, Matthew is claiming that the link Hosea made between the people of Israel and God’s “son” finds its fullest meaning – it is fulfilled and completed – in the person of Jesus.

Already, early in Matthew’s Gospel, we get the sense that Christ is going to change things, He’s going to complete God’s mission of setting the world right again.

I wish I could end there. However,

**II. IN TELLING OF THE SLAUGHTER OF THE INNOCENTS,
VV. 16-18 REVEAL THE DESPERATE NEED FOR HOPE.**

¹⁶Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men.

¹⁷Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah:

*¹⁸“A voice was heard in Ramah,
weeping and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be comforted, because they are no more.”*

A. The Massacre

According to estimates, the number of baby boys killed in the region of Bethlehem would have been between 10 and 30.

In the course of the Church's commemoration of this event, the number has grown drastically – to 14,000; 64,000; or even 144,000.

Of course, some have gone to the opposite extreme and claimed that this event never actually happened.

Matthew must have been making this story up to draw the connections between Jesus and Moses. He had the Old Testament texts and made a story to match.

That's one way around this difficult text,
but I think it's a cop-out.

Matthew quotes Jeremiah 31:15 and therefore creates a link in reverse to the Old Testament passage. However, in a certain sense, this link only works in one direction. That is, if one only had Jeremiah 31:15, it is obviously not a straightforward prophecy of a bloodthirsty ruler killing babies.

Matthew is using the Old Testament to make some sense of this senseless slaughter, not to create it.

Furthermore, this massacre at Bethlehem fits quite well with the historical portrait we have of Herod – especially in his later years. Herod was crazy. If he thought you were a threat to his power, goodbye! The man even killed three of his own sons.

It is therefore not altogether surprising that, as terrible as it was, the deaths of a dozen or so babies in the hill town of Bethlehem would not have made it into the secular history books of that violent period.

I still think it happened.

Does that make you feel any better? Perhaps a victory for the historical reliability of the Gospel accounts, but at what cost?

We're still left with bereaved mothers and bloodstained cribs.

I don't feel any better.

Although I'm sure I'll find this passage even more poignant when, Lord-willing, I am a parent myself someday, some of its true weight hit me for the first time when, after reading the passage together, my wife (a pediatric nurse) started to tear-up and, after a long silence, said: "I don't understand why those children had to die for Jesus to come... If I'm honest, it makes me angry."

She has a point, right? If God could save Jesus from bloodthirsty Herod, why not the Bethlehem babies? Didn't the angel of the Lord have enough free time to show up in the dreams of the other Bethlehem parents? Doesn't this event, like all the others I mentioned in my introduction, rightly prompt the question, perhaps asked with a tone of weeping and loud lamentation: ***"Why, God? Why?!"***

B. The Fulfillment

This passage sticks with me partially because my wife's name is Rachel. She has wept, as a nurse, over the often senseless suffering of her patients. And she is not alone. Matthew draws our attention to Jeremiah 31:15, depicting Rachel – the wife of Jacob, the mother of Joseph and Benjamin – as weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted, for they are no more. ***"Why, God? Why?!"***

The original context of this passage is the Babylonian invasion and exile of the people of Judah. Ramah, just 5 miles north of Jerusalem, was where the exiles were assembled in 586 B.C. for the journey into Babylon.

The prophet Jeremiah witnessed Jerusalem destroyed and its inhabitants terrorized. He poetically depicts Rachel, the Old Testament's paradigmatic and idealized mother of the people of Israel, as weeping for her children as they go into exile.

Imagine Eve, the mother of the living, weeping as she looks forward from the past to see all the horrible effects of the exile from Eden, and you'll get a similar idea.

Although some think Matthew used this verse due to the geographical proximity of Rachel's grave to Bethlehem, it's more likely that the connection is theological.

The connection is HOPE.

Jeremiah 31:15, although tragic, occurs in a hopeful section of the book. In fact, the chapter of Jeremiah 31 is best known for its depiction in vv.31-40 of the New Covenant! The quoted verse about Rachel weeping is followed by these two verses:

Thus says the Lord:

“Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears, for there is a reward for your work, declares the Lord, and they shall come back from the land of the enemy.

There is hope for your future, declares the Lord, and your children shall come back to their own country.”

Rachel was weeping over the exile.

And she is promised that it will one day end.

The exiles will return – as they began to do, 48 years later, in 538 BC.

It is important to realize that this “prophecy” did not somehow cause the tragedy at Bethlehem.

As John Calvin notes in his Gospel commentary, because Jeremiah's oracle had its own fulfillment regarding the exile to Babylon and the subsequent return, "Matthew does not mean that it foretold what Herod would do, but that the coming of Christ occasioned a renewal of that mourning, which had been experienced, many centuries before," by the people of Israel.

Because, you'll notice, the people of Israel were still in exile. Sure, five centuries had passed since they had physically returned, but they still lived under a foreign ruler, not a son of David, who could enter the city of David at will and have the baby boys slaughtered.

We have an encounter between two kings in this passage. The first, a crazed old man, is the illegitimate king of the Jews – deathly afraid of pretenders to his throne. The second, a vulnerable human baby, is the legitimate king of the Jews and of the world. When faced with the latter, the former should have bowed the knee – as did the wise men (who, you'll notice, came from the exile-lands of Babylon and Persia). Instead, Herod draws the sword, and the Son of God goes into exile, a refugee in the ancient land of slavery from which his people were bought and delivered by Yahweh.

With the mothers of Bethlehem, Rachel was still weeping.
Her children were not yet home.

Conclusion

What do we make of this?

Although the Jeremiah quotation points in the direction of hope, you'll notice that Matthew leaves it hanging on a note of lamentation.

Might I suggest that the yearly Feast of the Holy Innocents is our liturgical antidote to a merely superficial and sentimental Christmas season?

The realities of Bethlehem, of the Christian faith, and of our lives, often have more blood, sweat, and tears in them than we care to admit – more pain than our idyllic notions can contain.

The Incarnation is glorious, but it's also messy. Because we are messy! The human race – this very room! – is filled with Herods. We may not all kill babies out of fear, but our fear does drive us toward death. Think of it.

- What do our fears – of rejection, of failure, of powerlessness – drive us to do to *rupture* our relationships with God and with our fellow humans?
- What do our fears – of intimacy, of scarcity, of being taken advantage of – prevent us from doing to *foster* those same relationships?

Sisters and brothers, we Christians cannot afford an escapist religion of mere sentimentality which is out of touch with this broken and twisted world. **We cannot afford an escapist religion because we do not worship an escapist God!**

Now, remember: **evil is incomprehensible.** It is the impossible possibility – a headlong dive, away from the source of Life and Light, into the arms of nothingness and darkness. **It makes no sense!**

Therefore, some neat and tidy “answers” to the problem of evil can themselves be evil – by trying to explain that which cannot be explained!

Don't offer or seek such “answers.” It's better to remain silent, or to cry out **“Why, God? Why?!”** Job did. Jesus did.
JESUS DID...on the Cross!

**Evil cannot and should not be explained.
But it can, has been, and will be defeated!**

Although it does not lessen the tragedy, King Jesus, the commander of heaven's armies, did not abandon these baby boys, his very first standard-bearers, as Peter Chrysologus noted. Instead, he sent them on ahead of himself into victory.

Although it does not lessen the tragedies we face, our God does not escape evil and suffering at our expense.

Sure, he escaped Herod once...
in order to make it to the Cross,

where he took Sin and Death to their bitter end in our stead.

He went into the furthest and fullest exile – the grave –
in order to bring us back from our exile.

This return will look a bit different from the return in 538 BC, for it will be full and final.

As our second lesson today describes it,

*Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man.
He will dwell with us, and we will be his people,
and God himself will be with us as our God.
He will wipe away every tear from our eyes,
from the eyes of Bethlehem's mothers
and from the eyes of Bethlehem's babies.
And death shall be no more,
neither shall there be mourning,
nor crying, nor pain anymore,
for the former things have passed away."*

God, the Alpha and the Omega,
whose justice and mercy far outstrip our own,
will make all things new.

God will be our God.

And because of His Son –

who joined us in our distant depths,

and went into exile in our stead to bring us home –

We will be God's daughters and sons.

Amen.