

Sermon: Telling the Whole Christmas Story

Year A, Fourth Sunday of Advent

[Matthew 2:13-23](#)

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Herod the Great was just an awful, brutal man. He had sons who also ruled Israel and continued the family tradition of being awful and brutal and who were also named Herod, so I don't want anyone to confuse them. The one we're talking about today, Herod the Great, died around 4 BCE. But before he died, he had: killed his wife Mariamne, killed his first born son Antipater and killed two other sons.¹ He wasn't from one of the established families of Israel, where genealogies were important. He burned the library where the Jewish authorities kept the genealogies, so no one could prove they had a more distinguished lineage than him.² He left orders that when he died, all the political prisoners, all his political opponents he had in jail, were to be killed, so the whole country would be in mourning.³ He was an awful, brutal man.

When we hear that Herod *killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under* (Matthew 2:16), we are not surprised. But let's think about this for a moment. Wealthy, wise men come from the empires of the East. They ask the current king of the Jews where the new king of the Jews is and he doesn't know. He consults with the religious authorities, with whom he is in constant conflict, and they say that the Scriptures suggest the King of the Jews will be born in Bethlehem, a small village a few miles from Jerusalem. The rich strangers set off, and then go home without returning to Jerusalem. Given the number of spies and informants that Herod had, are we expected to believe that Herod could not have figured out within a few hours exactly which house, which family they visited?⁴ In a small town, close by, where they would have stood out in every possible way? Luke certainly doesn't mention anything like this in his account.

And it isn't like the Bible is our only source. There's a Jewish historian who was one of the leaders of the rebellion against Rome in 67 CE. He was captured, served as an interpreter and was eventually freed. He *hated* Herod and his sons. His history is full of every misdeed that entire family was ever rumored to have done. And he doesn't mention killing the boy children of Bethlehem.⁵

Some folks have done an analysis of the event given the size of Bethlehem, life expectancy those days, etc., and have come to the conclusion that if it happened, it would have involved 20-30 children.⁶ Of course, one child is too many. But we have images of hundreds or thousands. So maybe, given all the awful, brutal things Herod did, maybe this massacre didn't merit being mentioned anywhere else because it seemed small in comparison.

But if, 2,000 years later, we can at least articulate a reason to be skeptical about whether it happened or not, what about the people Matthew was writing for, who knew people from

¹ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975), 1:36.

² Raymond E. Brown, S.S., *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke*. (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1979), 87.

³ Brown, 227.

⁴ Brown, 188-189.

⁵ Brown, 189.

⁶ Brown, 204. Barclay, 1:37.

Bethlehem who had been around then? If he wants this to be taken as history, isn't he vulnerable to the accusation that he made it all up?

Look at where he puts this story. In the middle of the flight to Egypt. There's another Joseph who goes to Egypt. He has nothing when he arrives there, not even his coat of many colors, and because he knows how to take dreams seriously, he becomes an advisor to Pharaoh. He saves his family, all twelve brothers from dying of hunger in a famine when they come to Egypt.

Time passes in Egypt, and things go poorly for the Israelites, they become slaves, but they have big families and the Egyptians are worried they are going to be the minority in their own country. So Pharaoh orders the Egyptian midwives to kill all the boys at birth. One little boy, Moses, is saved and grows up to lead his people out of Egyptian slavery and into the Promised Land.

Is that what Matthew is doing? All along he has been arguing that when you look at Jesus, you see the whole history of the people of Israel. In his genealogy, you go from Abraham to David, to the Exile to Babylon and to the return. He has argued that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Hebrew prophets, at times quoting the Hebrew Scriptures directly. Now he is arguing that you do not have to choose between Moses and Jesus. Your real choice is Moses without Jesus or Moses with Jesus as the fulfillment of the Law.⁷ Throughout the rest of his gospel, Matthew will keep bringing up images that underline his argument that Jesus is the fulfillment of the promises first offered by God through Moses.

For that imagery to make sense, however, Jesus had to get to Egypt in the first place. For the Holy Family to flee and take refuge in Egypt, and then to make the arduous journey all over again a few years later when they had gotten their lives established down there, it had to be a cataclysmic threat. Matthew even uses some very careful word choice to argue that it was Herod's human wickedness that set the chain of events in motions that resulted in the murder of the children of Bethlehem. But once that chain of events began, God stepped into the flow of human history once again, and saved this very special child, this son of David, son of Abraham, son of God.

Amen, Brother Matthew, amen. Jesus is all that you say, and more. God does reach into the flow of human history. And all day, all night, angels watching over me my lord. Amen, Brother Matthew, amen.

But if that is so, why is *a voice heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refuses to be consoled, because they are no more.*" (Matthew 2:18)? If God can save one child from Herod, why not the rest? If God can come into this world, and the entire U.S. economy can put itself into a convulsion of spending and celebrating, and traveling to other people's homes just to celebrate that fact, if God can come into this world and we can have Peanuts specials and a Muppet Christmas and *It's a Wonderful Life*, why does Rachel have to weep for her children? Why in the middle of all this lovely story *about unto us is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord* (Luke 2:11) do we have this story about Rachel weeping for her children who are no more? If God can come into this world, why are we not even slightly surprised to hear that *when Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise*

⁷ Susan Hedahl, "First Sunday after Christmas Day, Theological Perspective, Matthew 2:13-23" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 1*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 164.

men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under (Matthew 2:16)?

Many of us will gather here in a bit more than 48 hours. We'll hear about the shepherds and the angels and how hope was born this night and we'll sing *Silent Night* and that's the world we want for our children all the time. However much we want that, however much we pray for that, we know that that world has not yet come. Many of you know that Pastor Renee Rouse, who served as the interim minister of this church before I was called here, recently lost her son Tre. And all of us, parents or not, but especially parents, pray that we never enter that reality. There are people here who have lost parents, siblings and, God forbid, children, and they hear the Christmas story, particularly the part where one child was spared and many others were killed and think that it feels a bit like a fairy story, or at least a story we tell ourselves to feel better.

Now, I cannot explain evil in this world in the presence of a loving God, but I can point out some things that changed the way I view this part of the Christmas story. I got this insight from Stanley Hauerwas' commentary on Matthew which you guys were kind enough to give me for Christmas this year. I'm so grateful.

When God's time, as embodied in Jesus and Jesus' birth, intersects with every day time, the time of Herod, it creates a political crisis.⁸ Rulers assume they control what determines how the story of their time is told.⁹ And everyone must tell their own stories in relation to the story of the ruler. But all the Herods of this world are seldom as powerful as they think. Herod the Great was a pawn used by Rome to keep order in a corner of their empire that was prone to rebellion. Rome doesn't and won't see Jesus as a threat. An enemy maybe, but they know how to deal with enemies. You kill them or co-opt them.¹⁰ What Herod and Rome can't handle is a group of people who refuse to believe that violence will determine the meaning of history.¹¹ Jesus teaches his followers, teaches us, that we have all the time in the world, made possible by God's unending patience and attention, to challenge the impatient violence of this world.¹² Jesus teaches us that the impatient violence of the Cross is met by the unending response of resurrection, promised to all.

Herod's own rule is made possible by the fear of all those he rules. His awful brutality makes sense when fear drives not only Herod but also the people he governs. The last thing a fearful people and their ruler wants is to be surprised.¹³ The last thing fearful people want to hear is that they can let go of their fear because the way the world works is changing. Herod is no fool. He knows his power can never be secure, because it is based on fear, and it draws its strength from death.¹⁴ The surprise understanding that God's love can outlast violence, can survive death, changes the world. It reduces the power of death.

That does not mean that we bake a casserole and tell those parents in Bethlehem that the death of their children doesn't really matter in the long run, because in the longest run we will all be

⁸ Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew*, in *Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), 37.

⁹ Hauerwas, 37.

¹⁰ Hauerwas, 37.

¹¹ Hauerwas, 37.

¹² Hauerwas, 37.

¹³ Hauerwas, 39.

¹⁴ Hauerwas, 41.

reunited with God's love. No. This new understanding that was born with Jesus that night in Bethlehem allows us to tell the truth about this world that we believe has been redeemed. We do not deny the awful brutality of this world. We witness it. Grace is not cheap.¹⁵ We say what we know to be true. The rulers of this world do not want us to believe that God's love is more powerful than their might.¹⁶ The rulers of this world do not want us to put our faith in unconditional love.¹⁷ They want us to be afraid, very afraid.¹⁸ They hope we will forget to tell this story to one another, so we will forget what we are up against.¹⁹

A story like this one from Matthew is a text of terror. It is a story of genocide. ... We can't fix it or justify it. We can't defend it. All we can do is tell it simply and with as little embroidery as possible. Let the truth do its own work. Let the truth honor those who died, as well as remind us of what Jesus really came to do with and among us.²⁰

Did the massacre of those children in Bethlehem really happen? I don't know. But it doesn't matter. Because if that massacre didn't happen, then another one happened two weeks later just down the street. If being a Christian means that I only get to share the happy stories about a cute baby on a cold night with an amazing star in the sky, then I have nothing to say to the Herods of this world. There is no way I can endure in the face of their fear and their awful brutality. But if I tell the whole story, about a God watching over a dad getting a mom who had just delivered a baby and that new born hundreds of miles overland to keep them alive in the face of evil, then I am telling a story of the real world I live in and the living God I follow.

Because as awful and brutal as Herod was, Herod died. Kings come and go, but God's people endure.²¹ They can endure because God has made endurance possible through the kingdom begun in Jesus. If we tell the real story of Jesus' birth, which certainly includes the sweetness we lift up on Christmas Eve but also the awful brutality of Herod, of all the Herods of this world, then we can endure in the face of fear. Because the kingdom began that night in Bethlehem, a kingdom more powerful than any of the Herods of this world can imagine.

¹⁵ Anna Carter Florence, "First Sunday after Christmas," in *Preaching Year A with Anna Carter Florence: Reflections on the Gospel Readings (2016-2017) Revised Common Lectionary*. (St. Paul, MN: Luther Seminary, 2016), 20.

¹⁶ Florence, 20.

¹⁷ Florence, 20.

¹⁸ Florence, 20.

¹⁹ Florence, 20.

²⁰ Florence, 20.

²¹ Hauerwas, 42.