

The Christmas Story – Act II

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers
at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Albuquerque,
on Sunday, January 8, 2023.

Matthew 2:1-23

Last week we listened to the Christmas story – a story of angels bending near the earth, of shepherds watching their flocks by night, of wise men from the East following a star. All the characters in the story converge on that little town of Bethlehem, to see Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus lying in a manger. The story leaves us with a beautiful picture of the nativity – a familiar tableau that adorns many churches and homes each Christmas.

But there is more to the story that we don't often hear. Once the wise men have come and gone, we usually move on to a new chapter in the gospels and a new chapter in Jesus' life. And so we don't often hear what happens next in Bethlehem – after the wise men have departed. This morning I want to examine what happens next in Bethlehem. I want to look at this "Second Act" in the Christmas Story to see what relevance it might have for us today.

King Herod was a brutal and hated tyrant. The Roman Senate appointed him King of Judea in 40 B.C. But in order to take the throne, Herod had to invade the country and overthrow Antigonus II, who had been put into power by Rome's enemies, the Parthians. With the help of Roman troops and his friend Mark Antony, Herod succeeded in conquering Judea, taking the city of Jerusalem three years later in 37 B.C. Herod would rule Judea with an iron fist for more than thirty years.

He's known as Herod the Great in part because of the colossal building projects he undertook during his reign. He built new cities, devised a new water supply for Jerusalem, built forts and fortresses, and renovated on a grand scale the Jewish temple, which had been destroyed by the Babylonians centuries earlier. Herod also was politically shrewd and terribly cruel. His was an extremely repressive regime. He maintained an army of foreign mercenaries, a secret police, and a spy network throughout the country. He ruthlessly defended his throne. Any threat of opposition was met with harsh

repression. Indeed, he had three of his own sons murdered when they threatened his power. It was said in Rome that it was better and safer to be Herod's dog than his son!

So, in Matthew's story, when Herod learns of the birth of a new king in Bethlehem, he plots to destroy him. Herod was King of the Jews, no one else. A rival to the throne could not be allowed to grow up and challenge Herod's rule. This rival king had to be killed – the sooner the better.

Herod sends the Wise Men to Bethlehem to search diligently for the child, and after they have found him, Herod asks them to bring him word so that he may also pay him homage. At least that's the rationale Herod gives them. Herod tries to employ the wise men to gather intelligence about this newborn king. Who is this child who is said to be born King of the Jews? When exactly was he born? What does he look like? And where is he now? Clearly, Herod had in mind sending a small hit squad into Bethlehem to kill this child who would be king.

But the Wise Men are warned in a dream not to return to Herod, and so they leave for their own country by another road. The noncooperation of the wise men thwarts Herod's initial plan, infuriating him. Without the intelligence he was expecting to acquire from the Wise Men, Herod is unable to "take out" the child king in a carefully targeted strike. So instead, he opts for a more scattershot approach. He orders the killing of every child in and around Bethlehem who is two years old or younger. It is a horrific act, an event so terrible that the writer of Matthew has Rachel, one of Israel's matriarchs, crying from the grave, weeping and wailing for her children, because they are no more.

Jesus, however, escapes this political violence. A messenger from God comes to Joseph in a dream to warn him of Herod's plan and to tell him to take the child and his mother to Egypt. They leave Bethlehem in the dead of night and head south toward Egypt. The journey must have taken them days, as the Egyptian border is some 75 miles away. But once in Egypt, they were safely beyond Herod's reach. And there they stayed as refugees – Jesus, Mary, and Joseph -- political exiles fleeing government repression.

It is a matter of some debate among biblical scholars whether the “Massacre of the Holy Innocents,” as it is known, and the Holy Family’s “Flight into Egypt” refer to actual, historical events, or are Matthew’s imaginative, literary attempt to harmonize Jesus’ birth narrative with passages from the Hebrew scriptures that he thought to be relevant. Among Coptic Christians of Egypt, however, the tradition is taken quite seriously. Many churches and monasteries across the Nile River Delta are located at sacred sites believed to be places that the Holy Family visited during their sojourn in Egypt. Whether the story is treated as history or legend, it invites us to think of Jesus as a refugee.

We don’t usually think of Jesus in those terms – as a refugee. We think of him as a friend of the poor. Indeed, we speak of seeing the face of Christ in the poor and treating the poor as we would treat Christ. Remember him saying: “just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me”? We also speak of seeing the face of Christ in the stranger, like the two disciples who met the risen Lord on the road to Emmaus but did not recognize him until he sat down and broke bread with them.

Given the second act of the Christmas Story, which we’ve looked at today, perhaps we should also speak of seeing the face of Christ in the refugee, in the displaced person, in the asylum seeker. They are some of the most vulnerable people in the world, often leaving their homes with little more than the clothes on their backs, and they are growing in number.

According to the UNHCR (the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), the number of people fleeing war, conflict, and persecution worldwide has never been as high as it is today. In just the last year the number of forcibly displaced people around the globe has increased by 15% to a total of 103 million, a figure that includes refugees, asylum seekers, Internally Displaced Persons, and other people in need of protection. The UNHCR said it is an unimaginable number that no one would have thought possible ten years ago. The increase was driven largely by the war in Ukraine, which began last February, as well as worsening climate conditions in West and Central Africa, and protracted displacement situations in Syria, Venezuela, Myanmar, and many other countries around the world.

Here in the U.S., apprehensions of people trying to cross the U.S.-Mexico border hit a record high of 2.4 million last year, shattering the old record of 1.7 million set just a year earlier. (Note that these numbers include individuals who have been apprehended multiple times trying to cross the border.) And for the first time in history, more Venezuelans, Cubans, Nicaraguans, and Haitians were encountered by U.S. Customs and Border Protection than migrants from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.

With the exception of unaccompanied children and many families, most individuals apprehended at the border — including asylum seekers — are immediately returned to Mexico or put on deportation flights to their countries of origin. Those who are not immediately expelled from the U.S. are either held in detention facilities or released to nongovernmental humanitarian groups that provide them with food, shelter, clothing, medical care, and help connecting with sponsors. That's the kind of good work being done by Albuquerque Asylum Seekers Welcome and the Albuquerque FaithWorks Collaborative.

Well, getting back to our story, Herod dies in 4 B.C. and massive social and political rebellion breaks out all across his kingdom. This armed revolt by the peasant classes was so widespread that it could not be quelled by local auxiliary forces. The Governor of Syria had to send three legions of Roman soldiers all the way to Jerusalem to put down the revolt. And 2,000 rebels were crucified outside of Jerusalem's walls before Roman dominion was restored. With the revolt crushed and order reestablished, Herod's kingdom was divided among three of his sons.

Only then is Joseph told in a dream that it is safe to return to Israel, because those who were seeking the child's life are now dead. For the Holy Family, repatriation to their home country is now possible. They set off on their return journey, but en route Joseph is again warned in a dream. They should not settle in Judea. Instead, they should travel further north to Galilee. So, that is what they did. They settled in Galilee, making their home in a town called Nazareth, where Jesus would grow up.

And now you know the rest of the [Christmas] Story!