

 **Main Street**  
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



**Matthew 2:1-12, 13-23**  
**“Seekers And Slayers”**

December 27, 2015  
(1<sup>st</sup> Sunday After Christmas)

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**“Following Christ From City Center!”**

**IB1: MATTHEW 2:1-12 "SEEKERS AND SLAYERS"**

No Numbers/Names/Origin/Transportation For Mysterious Visitors

<b>1) 2:1-2 WISE MEN COME: KING, BEHOLD, EAST, STAR, WORSHIP.</b>		Son of David Motif 5 Miles South Of Jerusalem
1	Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of <b>HEROD THE KING</b> ,	//Lk. 1:5, Ruled 37-4B.C.
	<b>BEHOLD</b> , wise men(magi) from the <b>EAST</b> <b>CAME TO JERUSALEM</b> , saying,	<i>Magi</i> = Ambiguous, Persian? Pious Gentiles = Best Of Pagan Lore/ Religious Perception/ Science
2	"Where is he who has been <i>born king of the Jews</i> ?"	Herod's Title, Only Gentiles Use "King of Jews," 27:11, 29, 37
God's	For we have seen his <b>STAR</b> at its rising (in the East),	New Body, Same Gk. Word Means <i>East</i> (v.1) And <i>Rising</i> (v.2)
People	and have come to <b>WORSHIP</b> him."	Worship/ Give Honor As God, Deity, Gentiles In Genealogy
<b>Come To Jerusalem (Jewish Nerve Center) For More Information On Heavenly Omen</b>		

Herod Murdered Wife, 3 Sons, Contrast With Jesus' Kingship

**2) 2:3-6 HEROD SUMMONS LEADERS: SCRIPTURE TELLS WHERE: TRUTH.**

		Special Revelation Clarifies General Revelation
3	a	When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled,
		Herod Was Half-Jewish Edomite, Not <i>Born</i> King
		and <i>all</i> Jerusalem with him; No Joy? Foreboding Sign Of Resistance, //21:10-11, 27:25
4		and assembling <i>all</i> the chief priests and scribes of the people,
		Unusual, Earlier Murder Of Sanhedrin
5		he inquired of them <i>where the Christ</i> (Messiah) was to be born
		Indifference Of Official Leaders
		They told him,
		Where? Magi More Interested Than Jewish Leaders
		John 7:42 On Bethlehem Tradition
God's	b	"In Bethlehem of Judea;
Book		Unimportant Bethlehem Now Greatly Important
		for so it is written by the prophet,
		They Know But Do Not Seek/Indifferent
6		'And you, O Bethlehem, in the <u>land of Judah</u> ,
		Composite Quote, Micah 5:1-2, Evokes David
		are <u>by no means least among the rulers of Judah</u> ,
		Scripture Re-written In Light Of Jesus!
		for from you shall come a ruler
		They Confirm Jesus' Credentials
		'who will govern (shepherd) my people Israel.'" Last Line Modified from 2 Sam. 5:2, 1 Chron. 11:2
		Their Scriptural Knowledge Does Not Lead To Seeking!

**2') 2:7-8 HEROD SUMMONS WISE MEN: STAR SAYS WHEN: FALSEHOOD.**

		Secret Night Meeting, Herod Embodies Evil
7	a'	Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly
		Ruthless Stealth Against Perceived Threat, //26:3-5
		and ascertained from them <i>what time the star appeared</i> ,
		When?
8		and sent them to Bethlehem, saying,
Satan's	b'	"Go and search diligently for the child,
Lie		Toddler ( <i>paidion</i> )
		and when you have found him bring me word,
		Herod Ordered 6000 Jews Murdered At His Death
		that I too may come and worship him." Worship Him (2:2, 8, 11), Murder Children (2:13-23)
		When and Where Now Known, But Not The Who!

**1') 2:9-12 WISE MEN DEPART: KING, BEHOLD, EAST, STAR, WORSHIP.**

		Seeking & Worship Is Proper Response To Jesus, 28:17
9	a	When they had heard <b>THE KING</b> , they went on <u>their way</u> ;
		Travel Report: Apparent Obedience
	b	and <b>BEHOLD</b> , the <b>STAR</b> which they had seen in the <b>EAST</b> went before <del>them</del> Angels!, Ex. 14:19,23:20
		Star Provides Guidance With Scripture
		till it came to the place where the child was. <i>Bar Cochba</i> , "son of a star," 2 <sup>nd</sup> Jewish War
10		When they saw the star,
		"a star shall come forth out of Jacob," Num 24:17-19 LXX, Messiah
		they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy;
		Great Joy vs. Jerusalem Anxiety
		Worshippers: 2:2, 11; , 28:17,8:2, 9:18,14:33,15:25,20:20,26;6-13,28:9
11	b'	and going into the house (i.e. family), they saw the child with Mary his mother,
		Village House, 2:23
		and they fell down and <b>WORSHIPED</b> him. //14:33, 28:9 Worship: Face To Ground (1)
God's		Then opening their treasures,
Son		Offering (2)
		they offered him gifts:
		Suggests Arabian Desert
		gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Ps. 72:10-11 (nations/kings) , Is. 2:1-4, 43:5-10, 60:3-6 (1 <sup>st</sup> 2 gifts); Mic. 4:1
		Myrrh Was Embalming Spice: Foreshadows Death
12	a'	And being warned in a dream not to return to <b>HEROD</b> ,
		Sleep As Place Of Revelation, 1:20, 2:13,19
		they <b>DEPARTED</b> to their own country <u>another way</u> .
		Travel Report: Higher Obedience

Parallels between the Moses/Pharaoh and the Jesus/Herod stories include: 1) Murderous Pharaoh Decrees Death Of Male Children (Ex. 1:16, 22), 2) Moses Saved (Ex. 2:1-10), 3) Moses Flees (Ex. 2:15), 4) Moses Returns After Pharaoh's Death (Ex. 2:23, 4:19). For further elaboration of the Moses story in Judaism, see pseudo-Philo's *Biblical Antiquities* 9:9-15; Josephus *Antiquities* 2:205-37.

MATTHEW 2:13-23, "SEEKERS AND SLAYERS"

<b>1) vv.13-15 ANGELOPHANY TO JOSEPH: FLEE TO EGYPT.</b>	<b>References/Allusions</b>
<b>a) v.13 Dream And Angel.</b>	Travel//Sacred Geography: Bethlehem/Jerusalem/Egypt/Israel/Nazareth
Now when they (the magi) had departed,	Child With Royal Gifts Must Flee For His Life
<b>BEHOLD</b> , an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph <b>IN A DREAM</b> and said,	2:12, Magi Saved By Revelation
"Rise, take the child and his mother and flee to Egypt, and remain there till I tell you,	1:20, 2:19, Holy Family Saved By Revelation
for Herod is about to search for the child to destroy him."	Further Directions Later, Indefinite Time
	10:23, 24:16, Escape = Faithful Response, Ex. 2:15
	Command + Reason, Ruled By Rome Since 30B.C., Outside Herod's Jurisdiction
<b>b) vv.14-15a Joseph's Obedience.</b>	Flight Of Church, 10:23, 24:16
And he rose and took the child and his mother by night, and departed to Egypt,	I Kings 11:40, Jer. 26:2, Land Of Refuge/ Exodus
and remained there till the <b>DEATH OF HEROD</b>	March/April 4 B.C., Jewish Refugees On The Run
	Flight As Obedience To God, Fight Another Day
<b>c) v.15b Fulfillment Citation: Hosea 11:1.</b>	Fulfillment Citations Freeze Action/ Explain Significance
This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet,	Emphasizes Divine Guidance, <i>Sensus Plenior</i> = Fuller Sense
"Out of Egypt have <b>I CALLED MY SON</b> ."	Highpoint! Hosea 11:1 (Prophets), Fulfilled in vv.19-23, New Exodus
	Citations Show Jesus Fulfills Ancient Plans, God In Control Of His Life

Each Major Move Echoes Scripture, Interprets Events

**2) vv. 16-18 THE WRATH OF HEROD AND SLAUGHTER OF THE INNOCENTS.**

<b>a) v.16a Setting After Divine Guidance.</b>	Radical Evil Is Present But Does Not Frustrate God's Plan
Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men,	No Peaceful, Sentimental Christmas Scene
was in a furious rage,	They Escaped! Actually Tricked By God
	Herod Kills Innocent To Save Himself, Opposite Of Jesus
	Jesus Is A Real Threat, Born With Price On His Head
<b>b) v.16b Herod's Evil Actions: Preserve His Rule At All Costs.</b>	Specific Number, Age, Location
and he sent and killed <i>all</i> the male children in Bethlehem,	Ex. 1:22, Likely Only A Few, Died In Jesus' Place!
and in all that region who were two years old or under,	//Testament of Moses 6:2-7 On Murder
according to the time which he had ascertained from the wise men.	Perversion, Like Pharaoh, Exodus 1:15-22
	God Not Interrupt All Evil; Gives A Measure Of Freedom
<b>c) vv.17-18 Fulfillment Citation: Jer. 31:15.</b>	God Hears The Grieving, Does Not Will Evil
Then <u>was</u> fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah,	//27:9, Passive Voice, Recorded/Not Approved
"A voice <u>was</u> heard in Ramah,	God Hears, No <i>In order that...</i> , Sounds Of Grief Over Personal Evil
wailing and loud lamentation,	Ramah = Mourning Place Of Jewish Exile To Babylon
Rachel weeping for her children;	Matriarch Of Israel (Jacob's Wife), Mothers Wailing
she refused to be consoled, because they were no more."	No Easy Comfort, Jer. 31:15 (Prophets)
	Jesus (New Moses/Israel) Recapitulates Events In Jewish History

<b>1') vv.19-23 ANGELOPHANY TO JOSEPH: RETURN FROM EGYPT.</b>	God Rescues His Son <i>From</i> Death, Later <i>Through</i> Death, Jesus Is Where Pain Is
<b>a) v.19-20 Dream And Angel.</b>	God Does Not Will Sin/Evil, But Incorporates It Into Providence
But when <b>HEROD DIED</b> ,	Jesus Born 6-7B.C., On The Gory Details: Josephus <i>Antiquities</i> 17.6.5 Para. 168-171
<b>BEHOLD</b> , an angel of the Lord appeared <b>IN A DREAM</b> to Joseph in Egypt, saying,	Habitual Form Of Joseph's Guidance
"Rise, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel,	Death Ends Capacity For Evil, Ex. 4:19, Flees From Land Of Bondage!
for those who sought the child's life are dead."	Other World Is Fully Aware Of This One, Deeply Engaged
<b>b) vv.21-22 Joseph's Obedience And Additional Dream.</b>	
And he rose and took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel.	
But when he heard that "Archelaus reigns over Judea in place of his father Herod,"	Ethnarch Over Judea, Samaria, Iturea
he was afraid to go there,	Fear As Useful Indicator, Till 6A.D.; Replaced by Roman Appointee
and being warned <b>IN A DREAM</b> , he withdrew to the district of Galilee.	Place Of Gentiles, Ruled By Herod Antipas (Killed John)
	Jesus Homeplace Is By Divine Design
<b>c) v.23 Fulfillment Citation: Judges 13:5-7 (nazir)?, Isaiah 4:3 (Heb. neser) ?</b>	
And he went and dwelt in a city called Nazareth,	4:13, John 1:46, 7:41 On Insignificance Of Nazareth/Galilee
that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled,	Nazareth Is Never Mentioned In Old Testament
"He shall be <b>CALLED A NAZOREAN</b> ."	Hick Town, Judges 13:5-7 (Samson/ holy from womb), Isaiah 4:3, 11:1, ? Acts 24:5

Focus On Messianic Topography, *Where* Question Of 2:2, 4, Full Of Place Names, Historical Characters

## SEEKERS AND SLAYERS

*“...and they fell down and worshiped him.”*

The end of the finding, the beginning of the serving.

M A T T H E W 2 : 1 1

Something about this Fall has felt like a breathless blur. The start of school, several illnesses, staff and family crises, preparations for Charge Conference— a unique annual form of torture for United Methodist pastors! Our Stewardship Campaign and Thanksgiving, then the rush through Advent to Christmas with weddings and funerals, then New Year’s— which to me always comes about a week too soon before my planning is done. Maybe it’s getting a bit older, but I don’t remember giving anyone permission to turn up the speed and compress the time. I find myself wondering, “What have I dropped? What have I forgotten? Are my pants zipped? Is there drool on my chin?” And in the rush to Christmas which is heavily front-loaded, it’s easy to stop with the babe in the manger, then trash the wrapping paper, put away the decorations, and be done with it all. On to something else!

Wait a minute! Neither Matthew nor Luke stop here. Luke follows what we call *the Christmas story* with accounts of the holy family’s meeting two aged Jewish prophets in the temple, first Simeon, then Anna,<sup>1</sup> followed by the memorable scene of Jesus in the temple dialoging with the scholars twelve years later.<sup>2</sup> Matthew— on the other hand— brings before us the story of the mysterious magi following a light in the night sky. They are the first Gentiles who come to honor the new king, but then there is Herod the terrorist who represents the extreme opposite reaction. He wants the baby dead and is willing to inflict collateral damage to make sure. From the beginning Jesus is a controversial political and religious figure. He’s the dividing point of history, the world’s rightful ruler. Matthew does not believe you can be indifferent to Jesus. Ignorance may be an option, but not indifference.

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<sup>1</sup> 2:22-39.

<sup>2</sup> 2:40-52.

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**TURNING TO THE TEXT**

**Where Curiosity And Worship Meet (2:1-12)**

A new light had risen in the night sky. Though it seems odd to those who live on our side of the telescope, many ancient peoples- including Jews- saw the stars not as distant planetary bodies but as near spiritual beings, a layer of angels interposed between our world and the invisible beyond to keep their places and mark the times and seasons. Critters and insects below us, the angels above us, and we image bearers placed in the cosmic order just a bit lower than the angels. So the best explanation of the new star is not a supernova or planetary conjunction or comet- as some speculate-<sup>3</sup> but an angelic guide which first moves west to Jerusalem, then southwest to Bethlehem, something no fixed heavenly body could do.<sup>4</sup> Stars were *the heavenly hosts*, mostly fixed, but this new appearance was mobile for GPS. The first hearers of the story would immediately identify the star as an angelic messenger sent to guide the star-gazing Gentiles to Jesus. It was a clue worth following.

The power of Christian imagination eventually transformed Matthew's spare account into a rich tapestry.<sup>5</sup> We don't know their names, number, or home address. Our best guess is that they were astronomer/astrologers from Persia. We infer there were three because of the gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The sixth century Armenian church gave them the melodic names Casper, Melchior, and Balthasar. The tradition which depicts one as a black African started in the late middle ages when theologians taught the Magi prefigured the sons of Noah, thus symbolizing all races of the world. That they were kings is an addition from Psalm 72:10, "May the kings of Tarsish and of the Isles render him tribute, may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts." Meaning has been seen in each of the gifts: gold for a king, incense for the

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<sup>3</sup> And so continue to do; see Greg Cootsona, "What Kind of Astronomical Marvel was the Star of Bethlehem?" [www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2015/december](http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2015/december).

<sup>4</sup> The key research here here is Dale C. Allison, "What was the Star that Guided the Magi?" *Bible Review*, December 1993, 20-24. It ends fruitless planetary speculation, as in the Cootsona article.

<sup>5</sup> See Joseph Kelly are *The Origins of Christmas* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004; *The Birth of Jesus According to the Gospels* (Liturgical Press, 2008).

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worship of his deity, and myrrh (a bitter spice) for burial.

All these asides attest to the magnetic power of these mysterious strangers, but none are in the text itself. Matthew's interest is that they are non-Jews, Gentiles who do not know the Scriptures but to whom God has spoken without words through an angelic light. And since we're all Gentiles, we may rightfully claim them as our spiritual forebears coming out of the shadows of polytheism and paganism into the light of Jesus Christ; theirs is a journey to conversion. The salvation offered in Jesus is not limited to Jews; it's for the whole world. Later the church will go to all the nations in mission, but here Gentiles come to the infant Jesus. He is the climax of Jewish history and the fulfillment of all other religions and philosophies. So we do not fear to invite the faithful Buddhist, Moslem, New Ager or Atheist to consider Jesus. He is the fulfillment of their longings and the key that unlocks their spiritual pilgrimage. The magi are our spiritual forefathers.

The magi seek out the new king in order *to worship him*, to bow down in honor. "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star rising in the East and have come *to worship him*?" Something transpires at Herod's back door about which he knows nothing. Strangers arrive from far lands asking disturbing questions. So in verses 1 and 2 Matthew clues us in that God has been speaking outside Judaism and using the heavens as the vehicle to spark curiosity. A new king has been born and is worthy of honor. There is no one so far from God that they cannot be set on a spiritual journey in the right direction. The Magi show that. Those who follow the light they have receive more light, and the end of all religious roads either ends in Jesus or it is literally *a dark, dead end*.

Matthew scores at least two points in the second scene where we see Herod consulting his theological cabinet. The first is that God's revelation through phenomena, in this case the angelic star, is not sufficient in itself. To know hints of God through nature or conscience, even angels, is not enough. The Gentiles must go to the Jews and their Scripture for messianic prophecy. There is God's wonderful world in all its complexity, but its witness is ambiguous until clarified by God's written Word. Scripture is a necessary way station on the way to Jesus Christ. His mother laid him in a manger of straw; God nestled him in a cradle of Scripture. You cannot bypass the Bible on the way to Jesus. The star gives the general location, but the Scriptures the specific place, "And you, *O Bethlehem*, in the land of Judah..." It's a good strategy to connect spiritual seekers with the Bible. Invite them to read

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**Matthew 2:1-12** ..... 7

one of the Gospels with a question, If the Jesus I read about is alive and available, would I want to meet him? If they're open, you can bet God will lead them the next step closer to confronting Christ. Start with Matthew or Luke is my recommendation.

Matthew's second point is to demonstrate that Jesus was opposed by the powers from the beginning. Even at the cradle we see the shadow of the cross. Jerusalem, as the center of government and religious power, is hostile. Here we meet the coalition of rulers, chief priests, and scribes who will figure later on in the passion narrative. The cosmic battle lines are drawn from the start.

What a confirmation it was for the wise men to discover their journey validated in Hebrew Scripture. That is how it is with divine guidance. It may start in a thousand different ways: a tragedy, a dream, an encounter with the supernatural, or as simple as a nagging question, "There must be something more to life?" Wherever God intersects life, wherever guidance begins, it's the beginning of a journey towards Christ, and it must pass through the Jewish people and the gate of Scripture on its way. For it is in the Bible, and particularly in the Gospels, that we discern the outlines and character of the one our hearts long for.

So now we know the *Who*— an infant king, the *Where*— Bethlehem, but what about the *When*? The answer lies in Herod's private meeting with the visitors:

"Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star appeared, and sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.'"

Can you feel the evil? Herod was a paranoid megalomaniac who regularly killed his children lest they foment rebellion against his rule. If a spiritual journey towards Christ always involves the Jews and the Bible, it also involves an encounter with evil, a force resistant to you and the one you seek. The Magi are inadvertently drawn into a plot to kill the very one they seek. Follow the light for any time at all and you will run into the darkness. I have, and do! That is how Evil often works, by seducing our best efforts for opposite purposes. Behind Herod's pious words we sense the strategy of the Evil One to destroy God's Messiah. John Meyendorff, a Greek Orthodox theologian, has written:

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"I submit it is impossible to understand the meaning of the Christian faith about man and the world, that it is impossible to be faithful to the significance of the Cross of Jesus, without admitting that Evil has a personalized existence, and therefore, a strategy, a sense of reacting and planning (or rather plotting) against God's work."<sup>6</sup>

Behind the human characters, behind Herod and the other leaders, an old conflict shapes up. The Wise Men are drawn to Christ, while other forces resist and plot. Whenever we, like Herod, use deceit and religious language to protect power, we are also operating under the influence of evil. Herod cared nothing for the Scriptures or the quest of the Wise Men; his interest was his throne alone. This is a word to the wise in election years when candidates of the left and right will use the rhetoric of our faith. Remember that as king, Jesus is the judge of every political arrangement, whether the ancient despotism of Herod or our own democracy. Christ will not finally be used for an alien agenda. His stands above them all with his own. Beware of Jesus who belongs to the N.R.A or the A.C.L.U. He's bigger than both!

The last scene is very nearly magical, and it is surely mystical. The sense of anticipation is palpable as our star-gazers trek the last five miles southwest from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. It is the altar call of the Magi, the culmination of an adventure that began one evening with a new light in the night sky. The observant, the curious, the seekers, are about to become finders. There is joy; there is homage; there is the offering of self in the giving of gifts for a king. If you've seen the posture of Muslims when they pray, kneeling with forehead to the ground, then you know the posture of the Magi. The central test of faith is that we humble ourselves and worship Jesus. Faith is an encounter which elicits awe and wonder: verse 11:

"When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy; and going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then opening their treasures, they offered him gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh."

To this point the wise men were unaware of Herod's plot. But then the God who first captured their attention rescued them through another form of divine

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<sup>6</sup> Andrew Walker, *Enemy Territory* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1987), 21.

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**Matthew 2:1-12** ..... 9

guidance, a dream: verse 12, "And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country another way."

We have abandoned dream analysis to the psychoanalysts, but the Bible is full of guidance by dreams.<sup>7</sup> While we sleep and enter another form of consciousness, God may speak. Quite an adventure, wouldn't you say? A guiding light that sparked curiosity, a long journey with friends, the confirmation of Holy Scripture, an encounter with evil, kneeling before the child in adoration and offering, a word from God through a dream to guide their return! I suspect these men spent the rest of their lives sharing what happened and how God led them. Maybe curiosity is the first step on the road to faith, and that curiosity is our best evangelistic tool, not to dump the whole load on folk all at once but to lead them a hint at a time. Our biggest challenge is not to give pat answers but to trust the Holy Spirit for the journey of each pilgrim because we know where it ends: in the worship of Jesus who is God the Son.

**The Shadow Side Of Christmas (2:13-23)**

Like it or not, there are people who seem to be given over to evil at the core of their persons. If there were no devil we'd have to invent one to explain the slaughter in war, holocaust, and genocide our days have witnessed. In Dostoevsky's *House of the Dead* there's a quote that attempts to explain what happens to and through despots like Lenin and Stalin, Hitler, Abu-Bakr al Baghdadi, and King Herod:

"Whoever has experienced the power, the unrestrained ability to humiliate another human being... automatically loses power over his own sensation. Tyranny is a habit, it has its own organic life, it develops finally into a disease. The habit can kill and coarsen the very best man to the level of a beast. Blood and power intoxicate. The man and the citizen die with the tyrant forever; the return to human dignity, to repentance, to regeneration, becomes almost impossible."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> See Lois Hendricks, *Discovering My Biblical Dream Heritage* (San Jose, CA: Resource Pub., 1989).

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Paul Johnson, *Modern Times: The World From The Twenties To The Eighties* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), 86.

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**Matthew 2:1-12** ..... **10**

In the Roman Catholic Church here is a second remembrance alongside Christmas. Tomorrow is *Holy Innocents Day*, and the appointed gospel is the story before us. But since for us Christmas ends on the 25<sup>th</sup>, we miss it. It's easy to skip over such passages. Who wants to come to church and hear about the slaughter of children? Why did God rescue Jesus and not all the others? Why did children have to die in his place long before he died in ours? Did the wise men play into Herod's hands even though they were following God's guidance?

The story of Jesus' birth is followed by two human responses which must be held together. The wise men seek and worship; Herod seeks to wipe Jesus out. One is seek and find, the other search and destroy. The wise men respond with exceeding great joy, Herod with exceedingly great hatred. Matthew lays out the options. Jesus Christ brings division, not just later but from the beginning. Which will it be? Jesus reveals our hearts. That our mainline churches have provided cover for the idea that pre-born children are not persons deserving legal protection makes me wonder which procession we are in and what changes it brings to our character.

To reject Jesus Christ and the challenge he brings is to set myself on a course away from God and eventually away from all that is good about being a person in God's image. I did not know till recently that Joseph Stalin was once in seminary studying for the priesthood. On the way with the wise men he ended up with the sword of Herod in his hand. In honest moments I know that, without the restraining influence of Christ, I retain the capacity to be a moral monster. We all do.

So why remember Herod at Christmas? Because when we ignore him we sentimentalize Jesus' birth and trivialize the challenge of the gospel. Sin and evil are real. The helpless suffer. The world Jesus entered, our world the Sunday after Christmas, is neither nice nor safe nor fair. Scripture does not exist to spare our feelings but to provoke us to faith and action in a world where sin and evil are always near at hand. I am tired of the this great faith being linked with a view of the world that is naive and superficial. God is in his heaven, and all is *not right* with the world. That is why Jesus came; in him God declared a new kind of war.

At the center in verses 16 through 18 is the Bethlehem holocaust: "...and Herod 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 which he had ascertained from the wise

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men.” Our best historical estimates are twenty to twenty-five deaths.<sup>9</sup> At the center is the bad news (this is the kind of world we live in!), but this evil core is surrounded on both sides by the intervention of God to preserve the life of one who will outlive Herod and finally cripple sin and evil and conquer death. Herod died; Jesus died and lives. Sin and evil do not have the final word. They are enfolded, surrounded, and finally rendered impotent by the God who can turn all events— even senseless and irrational- to his ends. The Christian gospel is a powerful resource; it empowers us to see the world as it is and still live with hope and courage.

I’m intrigued by Joseph. He never says anything; he listens, is silent. He dreams. He hears from angels and obeys. In his interactions Joseph learned two things about divine guidance. First, it comes a step at a time and requires obedience. Joseph walked by faith, not sight, verse 13: "Rise, take the child and his mother and flee to Egypt, and remain there till I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child to destroy him." No word about where to stay, nothing about how to earn a living or how long they would be refugees. Only the bare essentials, a terse telegram with an angel as the courier: "Pack now. Leave for Egypt. Danger. Further directions later. End. Signed- Angel of the Lord." Enough light for the next step. That is all God normally provides, because where you are to go depends on your participation all along the way. If you walk in the light given, God will give more.

The second thing Joseph learned was staying the course when God is silent. God told me to be a pastor and teacher, and until further orders it’s what I intend to do. In such times of faithful abiding it’s easy to wonder if you’ve missed something, "Did I really hear God?" Being a refugee with a baby and a young wife wasn't in Joseph’s plans. In the silence of Egypt he learned patience and trust. These are qualities which mark the mature disciple. Walking a step at a time in the light you have is not the exception; it’s the rule. If required of Joseph, how much more us?

At the time of Jesus' birth Herod was an old, megalomaniac dying slowly of gonorrhea and cancer, a despicable character. Finally, even his old patron Augustus Caesar admitted, "I'd rather be Herod's pig than his son." This was because Herod regularly murdered his wives and the sons they bore to protect his throne. This was the man who butchered the boys of Bethlehem after the Holy Family left for Egypt.

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<sup>9</sup> Paul L Maier, “The Infant Massacre- History or Myth?” *Christianity Today*, December 19, 1975, 7-10.

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Jesus is rescued, other children die. God does not break into human affairs willy-nilly or merely for our convenience. Evil is given a certain freedom in this world to the end. But God does act at those turning points necessary to bend events to providential ends. The protection of Jesus for his mission was such a time. God still works in this world, through angels and miracles and answered prayer, but it is according to God's wisdom, not our immediate desires. This argument of selective protection would have been no comfort to the grieving parents of Bethlehem who for the rest of life ended their prayers with *Why?* To say that their children are with God, which I believe, does not do away the grief though it may offer hope of ultimate reunion, which I also believe. There will be many surprises at the gates of heaven.

There are three Old Testament fulfillment citations in this story, one at the end of each scene, but the second is different. In the first and last divine purpose is expressed. The events happened *in order that* something from Scripture might find fulfillment in Jesus. But in the center quote from Jeremiah there is no *in order that* to signal clear divine purpose. Not *this was to fulfill* but *then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah*. Matthew flinches and uses the passive voice; he's unwilling to attribute the murder of children to God. It happened; it echoed earlier pain in Scripture, but it was not God's intent. The One Jesus spoke to in prayer as *Abba/Father*, does not will evil. That's left to human sin and the inducements of the Evil One. If the citation about Rachel weeping means anything, it means that nothing—no matter how dreadful—is able to frustrate the good purposes shown to us in Jesus. Human tears are remembered; God hears the cry of empty arms.

### CONCLUSION

God did not prevent Herod's butchery; instead, God preserved Jesus and his parents through a strategic withdrawal. Jesus would die, but not on this battlefield. God outwaits evil and overcomes it through patient persistence in love. Until the end, the Lord does not overpower evil directly but rather by subterfuge and timely intervention keeps the underground railroad of grace open and running. It was that power that carried Jesus to Egypt and brought him back to Nazareth after Herod's death. It was that power that kept him hidden for thirty years until he was prepared to take up his public work of confrontation against Sin and the Evil One. It is this same power who reaches out to each of us with the call to place our lives, our families, and our futures in the hands of wise heavenly Father who alone can guide us through the gnarled and dangerous maze of this world.

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