



## **Matthew 2:1-12, 13-23**

### **“The Aftermath Of Christmas”**

December 29, 2013  
(1<sup>st</sup> Sunday After Christmas)

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

**IB1: MATTHEW 2:1-23 "THE AFTERMATH OF CHRISTMAS"**

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 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,	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;	Unimportant Bethlehem Now Greatly Important
Book		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> ,	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,	Toddler ( <i>paidion</i> )
Lie		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)
			<i>When and Where Now Known, But Not The Who!</i>

**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
			Star Provides Guidance With Scripture
	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	
		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,	Offering (2)
Son		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, "SLAUGHTER OF THE INNOCENTS"**

<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.**

Radical Evil Is Present But Does Not Frustrate God's Plan

**a) v.16a Setting After Divine Guidance.**

No Peaceful, Sentimental Christmas Scene

Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men,  
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) v.16b Herod's Evil Actions: Preserve His Rule At All Costs.**

Specific Number, Age, Location

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 which he had ascertained from the wise men.

Ex. 1:22, Likely Only A Few, Died In Jesus' Place!

//*Testament of Moses* 6:2-7 On Murder

Perversion, Like Pharaoh, Exodus 1:15-22

God Not Interrupt All Evil; Gives A Measure Of Freedom

**c) vv.17-18 Fulfillment Citation: Jer. 31:15.**

God Hears The Grieving, Does Not Will Evil

Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah,  
"A voice was heard in Ramah,  
wailing and loud lamentation,  
Rachel weeping for her children;  
she refused to be consoled, because they were no more."

//27:9, Passive Voice, Recorded/Not Approved

God Hears, No *In order that...*, Sounds Of Grief Over Personal Evil

Ramah = Mourning Place Of Jewish Exile To Babylon

Matriarch Of Israel (Jacob's Wife), Mothers Wailing

No Easy Comfort, Jer. 31:15 (Prophets)

Jesus (New Moses/Israel) Recapitulates Events In Jewish History

**1') vv.19-23 ANGELOPHANY TO JOSEPH: RETURN FROM EGYPT.**

God Rescues His Son *From* Death, Later *Through* Death, Jesus Is Where Pain Is

**a) v.19-20 Dream And Angel.**

God Does Not Will Sin/Evil, But Incorporates It Into Providence

But when **HEROD DIED**,

Jesus Born 6-7B.C., On The Gory Details: Josephus *Antiquities* 17.6.5 Para. 168-171

**BEHOLD**, an angel of the Lord appeared **IN A DREAM** 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,  
for those who sought the child's life are dead."

Death Ends Capacity For Evil, Ex. 4:19, Flees From Land Of Bondage!

Other World Is Fully Aware Of This One, Deeply Engaged

**b) vv.21-22 Joseph's Obedience And Additional Dream.**

And he rose and took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel.

Ethnarch Over Judea, Samaria, Iturea

But when he heard that "Archelaus reigns over Judea in place of his father Herod,"  
he was afraid to go there,

Fear As Useful Indicator, Till 6A.D.; Replaced by Roman Appointee

and being warned **IN A DREAM**, he withdrew to the district of Galilee.

Place Of Gentiles, Ruled By Herod Antipas (Killed John)

Jesus Homeplace Is By Divine Design

**c) v.23 Fulfillment Citation: Judges 13:5-7 (nazir)?, Isaiah 4:3 (Heb. neser) ?**

And he went and dwelt in a city called Nazareth,  
that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled,

4:13, John 1:46, 7:41 On Insignificance Of Nazareth/Galilee

Nazareth Is Never Mentioned In Old Testament

"He shall be **CALLED A NAZOREAN**."

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

## THE AFTERMATH OF CHRISTMAS

*"...and they fell down and worshiped him."*

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

### MATTHEW 2 : 1 1

Larry Walters was a curious 33-year-old Californian who wanted to see his neighborhood from above, so he went to the Army surplus store and bought 42 used weather balloons. That afternoon he strapped himself in a lawn chair, to which several friends tied the now helium-filled balloons. Like any intelligent urban astronaut he took a six-pack of beer, a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich, and a pellet rifle, figuring he could shoot the balloons one at a time when ready to land. A man with a plan, but his math was a little off. Instead of the balloons lifting him 100 feet in the air as planned, he soared to more than 16,000 feet and into the middle of the air traffic zone at LAX. He'd just begun shooting balloons when he lost his grip, and away the rifle fell. Larry remained airborne for more than two hours. Soon after landing he was cited by the police; the reporters then asked, "Were you scared?"

"Yes."

"Would you do it again?"

"No."

"Why did you do it?"

"Because you can't just sit there."<sup>1</sup>

Some say curiosity killed the cat, and it nearly killed Larry Walters! But where curiosity withers, there dies with it the seed bed of faith, which is not first about believing certain doctrines as about risking myself to hints of God that are hidden like clues in a game. If anything the Magi were curious; they struck out across the Arabian desert, led by an omen in the heavens. They followed a star. What could be more adventuresome than that? Think *Indiana Jones*, or *The Blues Brothers* on a mission from God? Wacky Larry and the magi agree, "You can't just sit there!"

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<sup>1</sup> PreachingToday.com search under *Matthew 2*.

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**Matthew 2:1-12** ..... 5

If there's an attitude deadly to Christian faith, it's boredom and apathy; *sloth* is one of the seven deadly sins. Apathy is from the Greek word for *feeling* with an initial *a* added for negation. Apathy, a-pathos: the loss of passion. It's a dose of spiritual novocaine which numbs the soul with indifference.<sup>2</sup> Allan Chambers writes:

"The beginning of strength in religion is passion. Unless you feel, you will have little power to affect your world. One can, without passion, erect a life on this earth that is a *monument* to God, but a life which is a *movement* for God has to be greatly charged by burning feeling. Christianity is a pilgrimage, a pulsing power, a breath-taking beauty, and a haunting memory of a past exultation, which may yet again return."<sup>3</sup>

The magi were men of wise passion, holy seekers in the realm of the Spirit.

**TURNING TO THE TEXT**

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

A new light had risen in the East. Since many in the ancient world believed great events were signaled by correspondences in the heavens, it was a sign to be taken seriously, and for the Magi an invitation to set out on a journey. 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 and living spiritual beings, a layer of angels, shining creatures of pure mind and light interposed between our world and the invisible beyond to keep their places and mark the times and seasons. Insects below us, the angels above, and we placed in the cosmic order just a bit lower than the angels as in Psalm 8. So the best explanation of the new star is not a supernova or a planetary conjunction, as some speculate, 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

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<sup>2</sup> On *acedia* (Greek for *sloth*), see [www.pathsoflove.com/acedia/acedia](http://www.pathsoflove.com/acedia/acedia).

<sup>3</sup> "Monument or Movement," *Circuit Rider*, Oct. 1991, 20.

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

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**Matthew 2:1-12** ..... 6

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 new; it arose in the East. They were watching.

I remember a summer night when I and my father, a Navy navigator, lay on our backs in the yard as he named the constellations he'd studied in a Clemson astronomy course and from which he'd taken star sightings as his attack cargo ship *The Turandot*- now a reef off North Carolina- headed from the Panama Canal to Honolulu to prepare for the invasion of Japan. I was duly impressed as a ten year old and thought, How could a man know so much? All about the human body, all about the heavenly bodies, all about the great events of the war, how to use a sextant and plot coordinates on a map in combat control; to his death he loved tapping out messages in Morse code at the supper table. Earlier in life he'd painted and all his life read and wrote poetry and gave magnificent toasts. He made me want to learn and love what I learned because of the appreciation it gave for all good things. It worked; it's why I'm here today. The world and his patients were his daily classroom. He read the living human text in its environment, and I read the written biblical texts in theirs. What a blessing! In my book there is a fourth wise man.

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 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 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, outsiders, pagan practitioners of astrology, Gentiles who do not know the Scriptures but to whom God has spoken

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<sup>5</sup> Two helpful books by 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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**Matthew 2:1-12** ..... 7

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 Christ. 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. Whatever truth they have gleaned from their native religion is also found in him, and more besides. 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. These three are our spiritual forefathers.

The magi seek out this new king in order *to worship him*, to bow down in honor. They ask, "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. His counselors missed it. Strangers arrive from far lands asking disturbing questions. Soon the palace is a-buzz with speculation and consternation. 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 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.

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**Matthew 2:1-12** ..... 8

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 through 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 one they seek. Follow the light for any time at all and you will run into the darkness. That is how Evil works, not directly, but 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:

"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

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planning (or rather plotting) against God's work."<sup>6</sup>

Behind the human characters, behind Herod and the other leaders, an older cosmic conflict is shaping up. The Wise Men are being drawn to Christ, while other forces resist and plot. Whenever we, like Herod, use deceit and religious language to protect power, then we are also operating under the influence of the Evil One. Herod cared nothing for the Scriptures or the quest of these Wise Men; his interest was his throne alone. This is a word to the wise in election years when candidates the left and right will use the rhetoric of our faith to advance their ambitions. Remember that as king, Jesus is the judge of every political arrangement, whether the despotism of Herod or our own democracy. Christ will not finally be used for any alien agenda. His stands above them all with his own and the Father's agenda.

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 sign 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:

"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 participants in Herod's plot. But then the God who first captured their attention rescued them through another form of divine 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

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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** ..... 10

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 in the company of friends, the confirmation of Holy Scripture, an unknowing encounter with evil, kneeling before the child in adoration and offering, a word from God through a dream to guide their return! Anything but boring. I suspect these men spent the rest of their lives sharing what happened and how God led them. It may be that 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 create curiosity and 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, Sadaam Hussein, 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>

In the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches there is a second remembrance alongside Christmas. Yesterday, December 28, is *Holy Innocents Day*, and the appointed gospel reading is the story before us. But since for us Christmas ends on

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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** ..... **11**

the 25<sup>th</sup>, we never make it to the shadow side. It's easy for preachers to skip over such passages because they are so disturbing. Who wants to come to church and hear about the slaughter of children? It raises too many questions: 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? Every year about Thanksgiving the platitude reemerges, "Let's put Christ back into Christmas." After reading Matthew and the daily paper I make a different plea: "Let's put Herod back; he's still a part of our world."

In Matthew's birth stories Herod stands in opposition to the wise men. The story of Jesus' wonderful birth is followed by two human responses which must be held together in tension. The wise men seek and worship; Herod seeks to kill. One is seek and find, the other search and destroy. The wise men respond with exceeding great joy, Herod with exceeding great hatred. The infant Jesus is adored by one, abhorred by the other. By giving us both the positive response of the magi and the negative of Herod, Matthew lays out the options. Jesus Christ brings division to humanity, not just later but from the very beginning. Worship or hostility, obeisance or resistance, which will it be? Jesus reveals our hearts for what's at their core. To be faithful to Matthew we must follow the star with the wise men and kneel before the infant Jesus in worship, *and* we must go with Herod's soldiers as they follow the same path, swords in hand. Matthew would have little tolerance for our singing, "O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie," if we forget that the stillness shortly afterward is because the cry of many children has been silenced by Herod's storm troopers. And when we sing, "What child is this, who lays to rest, on Mary's lap is sleeping," Matthew would add in a mournful minor key, "And what child is this, soon laid to rest, on his mother's lap is bleeding?"

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.

A few years back I spoke with a man who paid for three abortions, quite a lady's man, they say. You see, children got in the way of unhindered pleasure and needed to be disposed of. *I love you became Here's the money, now fix it!* He

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thought he was clever, taking advantage of the freedoms of our liberated day, a world without complications, but now he has the dripping sword of Herod in his hand. He did not realize his own lack of conscience is an indicator his soul's been repeatedly scalded by the evil he cooperated with. Where once was sensitivity and moral feeling, now only a thick overlay of ugly scar tissue. All he could give me when challenged was a blank, dead stare. "You sir, are a hit man; you have found accomplices and taken out contracts on the most innocent, and beyond that your own children. How old would they be now? Would one have your name? How would you feel about facing them with Jesus at your death?" It disturbed me to knock at his conscience and find no one home. Not a tear. Something inside him was dead. A life of fornication and seduction had killed something precious within and severed one of the basic bonds that holds life together, a fragile link of love and pride between the generations. He would never hear himself say *my son* or *my daughter*.

If there are men who've done the same and not come clean before God, you are hiding a cancer in your own soul. Jesus Christ is merciful, but you must name it and face it and grieve and ask his forgiveness if you are to move from the ranks of Herod to the company of the Magi. Rationalizations do not work because they protect us from truth. But if you humble yourself and name it clearly, there's mercy; the cross of Jesus proves it, and the wound in your soul can be stitched shut and heal. You can feel God's mercy again and no fear. Whatever your politics- left or right, I tell you there is a blight on the land and the cry of innocent blood goes up before the Lord. Too many Herods, not enough Magi. Over the years I've found it easy to lead women to forgiveness in this area, partly because the burden of the pain is theirs since only women get pregnant. I've seen them recover their freedom and confidence in God after old-fashioned confession and absolution.<sup>9</sup> But men with money in their pocket, whose bellies never swelled, who hide behind the law and think they got away unscathed because the knife never drew their blood, these are the one's in danger.

So why do we need to 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. This world still has its Herods and Husseins and their heartless fraternities of power. The world Jesus entered, our world the Sunday after Christmas, is neither nice nor safe nor fair. Scripture does not exist

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<sup>9</sup> On the history and practice, see Annemarie Kidder, *Making Confession, Hearing Confession: A History of the Cure of Souls* (Collegetown, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010).

**Matthew 2:1-12** ..... **13**

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 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 men." Our best estimates are twenty to twenty-five deaths.<sup>10</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. God's purposes cannot be thwarted. 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: "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? When will God speak again?" Being a refugee with a baby and a young wife wasn't in Joseph's plans. But the guidance of God will not send you

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

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where the grace of God cannot keep you. 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 the earthly father of Jesus, how much more us?

At the time of Jesus' birth King Herod was an old, paranoid, megalomaniac dying slowly of gonorrhoea and cancer, a truly despicable character. Finally, even his old patron and friend 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. At a swimming party in Jericho he once drowned the high priest, his own brother-in-law. As he approached death Herod worried that no one would mourn his passing. His solution? Gather leaders from all over the country and imprison them in the coliseum at Jericho where they would be slaughtered by archers at his death so that universal mourning would accompany his passing. This was the man who butchered the boys of Bethlehem after the Holy Family left for Egypt.

Jesus is rescued, other children allowed to die. God does not break into human affairs willy-nilly or merely for our convenience. Evil is given a certain freedom in this world. But God does act for his own purposes, at those turning points necessary to bend events to providential ends. The protection of Jesus for his future 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 overarching 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 wonderful surprises at the gates of heaven.

The Christian understanding of the human personality allows for evil to penetrate and even gain mastery of the self. There are persons who can be classified as evil. And when such persons gain political and military power, holocausts result, children die, countries are gobbled up. In our own history are Herod episodes. One hundred and twenty-three years ago today, December 29, 1890, at a place in South Dakota named Wounded Knee, the following eye-witness report was written:

"Men and women and children were heaped and scattered over all the flat at the bottom of the little hill where the soldiers had their wagon guns, and westward up the dry gulch all the way to the right ridge, the dead women and children and babies were scattered.... It was a good

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winter day when all this happened. The sun was shining. But after the soldiers marched away from their dirty work, a heavy snow began to fall. The wind came up at night. There was a big blizzard and it grew very cold. The snow drifted deep in the crooked gulch, and it was one long grave of butchered women, children, and babies, who had never done any harm and were only trying to run away."<sup>11</sup>

If for no other reason, let's put Herod back in Christmas so that we have the intellectual categories to identify such as evil, not just a necessary move in national or foreign policy. We are all capable of great sin and evil, so much the more when we band together under some ideology or great cause which relieves us of individual accountability. The truly wicked stuff we do together.

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 a sense of 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; he is unwilling to attribute the murder of children to God's will. It happened; it echoed earlier pain in Scripture, but it was not God's intention. The God of the Bible, 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.

Dr. Jeffrey Burton Russell has written four volumes of intellectual history on the idea of the devil from the ancient world to modern times. In his final volume he concludes with these words which I affirm as robustly Christian:

"If the Devil exists, what is he? If the concept has any meaning, the Devil is the traditional Devil. He is a mighty person with intelligence and will whose energies are bent on the destruction of the cosmos and

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<sup>11</sup> John Neihardt, "Black Elk Speaks," quoted in Gabe Huck, *A Book of Family Prayer* (New York: Crossroad, 1979), 87.

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on the misery of its creatures. The Devil puts the child in the oven and nuclear weapons in their silos. We must strive against this evil with every syllable of our sanity. Evil can never be fought with more evil.... Only affirmation can overcome negation; only good can overcome evil; only love can overcome hatred.... In spite of our miserable record... we have the ability to use our freedom to embrace new modes of thinking, to find a way to transcend and integrate evil and turn its immense force towards the good.... The cosmos is alive with a power that encourages us and aids us to do so."<sup>12</sup>

God did not prevent Herod's butchery; instead, God preserved Jesus and his parents through strategic withdrawal. Jesus would die, but not on this battlefield. God out-waits 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.

### CONCLUSION

Our God is the bounds of history. And whether you go *with the flow* of God's will like Joseph or *against it* like Herod, God will gain glory from your life. Evil is a personal power which is loose in the world and always scheming to thwart the spread of the knowledge of God and the goodness that flows from the knowledge. It's terror and pain are real but temporary. The love of the Holy Family outlasted the schemes of Herod and shaped the life of child through whom light spoke against the darkness. Guidance in the life of faith comes a step at a time and will lead you places you never intended to go. Be encouraged as you enter the new year. Listen for God's voice. Obey like Joseph. Resist evil when you can; flee it when directed to do so, and know that the Living God cares for you. You are invited into the divine purposes. Wacky Larry and the wise men were right, "You can't just sit there!"

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<sup>12</sup> *Mephistopheles: The Devil In The Modern World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ., 1986), 301.

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