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Matthew 2:13-23  
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## **The Nightmare AFTER Christmas**

Christmas has come and gone. The baby is born. The angels have sung their songs and have gone back to wherever it is that angels go after a performance.

And the shepherds have gone back to sit with their sheep and tell and re-tell the story of their exciting night in Bethlehem.

Everything is back to normal. Well ... almost everything. Everything except King Herod.

Herod has heard the story of the birth of this new King, and has made it clear that he intends to eliminate this future threat to his throne.

As writer Frederick Buechner so beautifully put it, "For all Herod's enormous power, he knew there was somebody in diapers more powerful still."

So the angel returns to Joseph in a dream and warns him to take the baby and his mother and run across the border as fast as their feet will carry them.

And where, exactly, does God tell Joseph and his family to go? Egypt! The land of the Pharaohs. The land of slavery and oppression.

Egypt is the place God's people had escaped. They'd been there and they didn't like it.

Yet God, who presumably is powerful enough to protect one little baby from a wicked king, sends the hope of Israel running back to the very place Israel had escaped from.

Just how long they stayed in Egypt, and where they lived while they were there we are never told, but finally after Herod dies, the angel hunts Joseph, Mary, and Jesus down and tells them that it is safe to return home.

However, one problem now that Herod is dead, Bethlehem and Judea are under the control of his son Herod Archelaus, who seemingly was as dangerous as his father had been.

So, Mary and Joseph decide that the safest thing for them to do is to forget about going back to Bethlehem, and go straight back to Nazareth.

They apparently make the trip safe and sound and that brings an end to this little part of the story.

Ah, but I left one part out, didn't I? It has to do with Herod.

Interestingly, history calls him Herod the Great. And to his credit, he established something Israel had lacked since the days of King Solomon -- a harbor at a seaport city he built and called Caesarea.

He also built a royal palace, a theatre, and an amphitheater and a good many fortresses in outlying areas.

Maybe his greatest accomplishment, though, was the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem.

But all that belays the fact that he was not a very nice man.

Herod is the quintessential villain. He is Simon Lagree, Philthy McNasty, Snidley Whiplash, Captain Bly, Lex Luthor, Darth Vader, the Grinch, and Lord Voldemort all rolled into one.

He may be the one John Calvin was thinking of when he came up with the theology of the Total Depravity of Humanity.

In all of Christian history, there may not have been anyone as vile and evil as Herod.

I mean, get this, during his lifetime, Herod was married to ten different women. He had fifteen children, ten of whom were boys. As his sons grew up and became men, one or more were destined to become king.

Being more than a little paranoid, Herod did not trust his sons and he even accused two of them of treason.

In 7 B.C., these two sons were sent back to Rome, put on trial, and assassinated. In 4 B.C., Herod also killed his oldest son.

No wonder that Caesar Augustus said of Herod: "It is better to be Herod's pig than Herod's son."

The quotation is actually a play on words. In Greek, which cultivated Romans spoke at the time, the word for pig (hys) and son (hyios) sound alike. "It is better to be Herod's hys than Herod's hyios."

Then on the day Herod died, he arranged for a large number of people to be rounded up in Jerusalem and executed on that day as well.

You see, he knew that there wouldn't be any mourners for him, so the numerous executions in Jerusalem at the time of his death assured that there would be many mourners everywhere.

That's the kind of man Herod was. And as most rulers of his day, and the despots of our day, he was fearful that someone would take his crown.

So, when the magi, the wise men, never reported back to him, he went into a rage.

It was in this rage that Herod sent an elite group of storm troopers into the little village of Bethlehem with orders to kill every child under the age of two. And soon it was accomplished.

Now scholars point out that, fortunately, Bethlehem was a small village, and we are most likely only talking about 30 to 40 children who were killed.

But if you ask any one of those 30 or 40 mothers, I'll bet they thought it was way too many.

Can you imagine, the Messiah has come. God is with us. We are delivered!

And yet, innocent children ... toddlers and infants just saying their first words or taking their first steps, are senselessly murdered by a demented tyrant. Why?

If God is so powerful, if Jesus is really worth following, why?

If God is powerful enough to take on a human body, why doesn't God protect our bodies when we drive our cars or have to go to the hospital.

If God can save our souls, why doesn't God save our friends' lives or protect our families from disease? Why?

Bethlehem welcomed the Messiah just as we are asked to welcome Christ into our own hearts, and learned that doing so we are not saved from grief or loss.

Some argue that the important thing to remember is not that God allowed these babies to die, but that God protected the hope of all humanity in Jesus.

I'm sure that worked for everyone but the parents, who wouldn't have minded being let in on Joseph's dream of warning.

But they weren't. Accepting Jesus, turning to God, repenting and seeking forgiveness ... they don't necessarily fix anything.

Nevertheless, doing these things changes us, and starts us on a road every bit as miraculous as the one Jesus followed.

But, it's also every bit as dangerous too, and filled with just as much grief.

It is, I think, no accident that shortly after his birth and visit by our inspired magi, we find our savior hiding in a strange land, while the violence of the world continues unchecked.

That's why it's our story too. That's how we know he's our Savior.

Some people gripe that the stories of the Bible are too incredible, too miraculous, for a sane, rational person to believe.

But the stories of Jesus, if we're honest with ourselves about who we are and how the world works, are too real and too honest not to be believed.

There's confusion and doubt, weakness and fear, there's death and grief.

The scriptures are realistic about the human condition. There are evil people in this world.

We would rather that this story of the slaughter of the innocents were not in the Christmas story. But it is, because that is the kind of world we inhabit.

A certain church had just completed their annual Christmas pageant. There had been Scripture readings, and hymns, and candle light, and decorations.

It was beautiful and reverent and joyful. Everyone was enjoying that warm and worshipful attitude that we often refer to as the "Christmas spirit."

The pastor was just reciting her closing prayer when she felt a little hand patting her leg.

Seven-year-old Lilly, who had played King Herod in the Christmas pageant, wanted to say something. Amused, the pastor handed the microphone to Lilly.

Lilly stared at the congregation and (apparently knowing her bible) announced loudly, "I am King Herod, and I have been watching you. I am going to kill all your babies."

An uncomfortable murmur spread through the congregation. Lilly's declaration put a serious damper on the "Christmas spirit" that everyone had been feeling moments ago.

The members of the congregation wanted to go home feeling good. Instead, Lilly had given them something profound to think about.

The truth is, we live such sheltered lives. We cannot even imagine the way many people live in places like the Gaza Strip and Syria and Afghanistan.

These people see Herod all around them – all the time.

The 9-11 terrorist attacks brought it home to us for a while, as did the Boston marathon bombing, but for the most part, we as individuals are unscathed.

The scriptures, though, are realistic about the human condition. Life is hard.

The story of Herod is a stark reminder of that truth. This is a scary world in many ways. But evil does not have the last word.

Some of you may be familiar with a speech that Martin Luther King, Jr. gave at the conclusion of a march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama on the 25th of March, 1965.

In the speech, Dr. King asks how long will it be until the hopes of his people would be realized.

“How long will justice be crucified, and truth bear it?” he asks.

“I come to say to you this afternoon, however difficult the moment, however frustrating the hour, it will not be long, because ‘truth crushed to earth will rise again.’”

If you were to read the speech on the Internet, you could see the responses of his audience (Speak it! Yes sir! All right! How Long?) encouraging the preacher to “preach it.”

Now, if any of you would like to throw in an “Amen” or maybe a “How Long?” – wait, if you say that, you might be really asking “how much longer am I going to preach ... oh well, whatever you want ... feel free to go right ahead!

Dr. King asked:

How long? Not long, because “no lie can live forever.”

How long? Not long, because “you shall reap what you sow.”

How long? Not long, because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.

How long? Not long, because:



Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord; He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;

He has loosed the fateful lightning of his terrible swift sword; His truth is marching on.

He has sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat; He is sifting out the hearts of men before His judgment seat.

O, be swift, my soul, to answer Him! Be jubilant my feet! Our God is marching on.

Glory, hallelujah! Glory, hallelujah! Glory, hallelujah! Glory, hallelujah! His truth is marching on.

And that is the glorious testimony of Scripture. Evil shall not have the last word. His truth is marching on.

The scriptures tell us that even in a world filled with demons we can have hope!

How do we know? Because God has already been there. God didn't just stick around for the party.

God was there the morning after, wrapped up in traveling clothes, perhaps even disguised as luggage to fool the guards, marching off into the unknown to hide among hostile strangers. God has been there.

Watching others suffer unjustly. God's been there.

Returning to a longed-for place of hope and promise, only to find things are worse than before. God's been there, too.

And God did it all as a helpless child relying constantly on the love, support, and protection of others.

Wherever we hide ourselves, wherever our Egypt, wherever our place of dark fears and danger, wherever our refuge and safety, wherever we end up (even in San Jose in the heart of Silicon Valley), God knows the way to meet us there because God, our loving Creator, has already been there before.

But, our text also reminds us that the Herods of this world ultimately do NOT prevail. Sooner or later they lose their power. Sooner or later they die.

Today, as we remember the Christ-Child and the danger he was in, and his flight into Egypt as a refugee; we also pause and remember today all of the children in this world who have been or who are right now being abused, tortured, murdered or living somewhere as refugees.

We remember, too, the parents of these children.

One day, these children and their parents shall be first in the kingdom of heaven.

One day they shall be healed and restored completely from their sufferings and their grief.

One day when the Christ-Child shall become King of kings and Lord of lords, all tyrants; all the Herods of this world shall be no more.

One day, King Jesus shall destroy all evil powers completely and rule eternally in perfect peace and love.

But until that time comes, we are called to stand up to injustice, to bigotry, to fear, to violence – whenever and wherever it rears its ugly head.

And to know that we do not stand alone – for God is with us!

*Amen...*