

“Savior of the Run”

Matthew 2:13-23

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King Herod was obviously not a very good student of history, or if he was, he just didn't care. If he had known his history, he would have known that it was a futile effort to try to catch the Savior of the world in a dragnet of death. It didn't work for Pharaoh. It didn't work for Herod. And both Moses and Jesus grew up to be the Saviors of their people. You may remember in the early chapters of the book of Exodus that Pharaoh, King of Egypt, feared the growing influence of the Hebrew slaves building his pyramids and so ordered his midwives to see to it that only the female children of the slaves survived. Of course the midwives, normal people in their right minds, could not comply, and so the Hebrews kept adding to their numbers until Pharaoh command all his people to kill the newborn sons of the slaves. But young Moses, protected by the hand of God and the courage of the midwives, escaped that fate in a basket of reeds and floated down the river to become the leader of his people out of their bondage. There is no frustrating the plans of God.

Whether a poor student of history or just a really awful and ruthless person, Herod fell victim to the same fear that prompted Pharaoh to try to wipe out a generation of threats, the fear that all people who hold absolute power have of losing it. And so the unreasonable fears of one man lead to the unending weeping

of others, the little town of Bethlehem awakened from its stillness to chaos as the boots of soldiers pounded the same streets Mary and Joseph traveled just weeks before. The town in which there was no room in the inn, would soon have plenty of space, its population reduced by the slaughter of the innocents in Herod's vain attempt at a war on terror, a terror he would not even live to see, his death coming but a couple of years later, barely enough time for young Jesus to learn how to count, much less brandish a sword against the empire. If Herod wanted to eliminate the threats against him, he might have started by eliminating the reasons people would have wanted to threaten him in the first place, but instead he created a whole new level of animosity so that anyone in Bethlehem who hadn't already been against him certainly was now. Some people never learn, and some people never care.

Thank God we must only read about this ignorance and fear once every three years, as the slaughter of the Innocents is only recorded here in Matthew. Thank God we must only put a damper on our Christmas cheer in Year A of the Lectionary, for in other years we may continue the celebration remembering Simeon and Anna greeting Jesus in the temple, or admiring the wisdom of the Christ child impressing his elders at a tender age asking questions of the Rabbis. Would that we only had to endure the reality of the days following Christmas once every three years instead of mourning with Pakistanis who lost a leader to fear and ignorance, or Kenyans caught up in post-election violence by those who fear an

election stolen from them, or Iraqi and US mothers whose sons and daughters were sacrificed to a war on terror, all events which have taken place this week when we, and the whole world, should be basking in the glow of remembering the coming of the Prince of Peace. Would that we got that kind of break every three years. But the slaughter of innocents continues in every nation at every hour in every generation, whether or not hope has entered the world again on December 25. That is just the way it is.

And yet, and yet, in the midst of all that suffering, our mischievous God sends angels in dreams. And refugees take to the highways in search of a place to lay their weary heads without fear for their lives. And the savior of the world survives the slaughter of those who would be his playmates. Is it just that Jesus survived and the rest did not? Of course not, but does that mean we do not celebrate it? Was it God who killed hundreds or thousands, or Herod? Was it God, or Herod who saved even one? I am as disturbed as the next person at the price paid by those unfortunate enough to be born at the wrong place at the wrong time, but I am grateful for that one who was saved, even if he had not been the one who survived to save me. I am grateful that God was paying attention and that angels were at the ready, and that there were safe places in the world for those on the run, and, that Matthew did not shudder so much at this horrible history that he left us to discover again on our own the perils of forgetting our history. As the old saying goes, those who forget history are doomed to repeat it. Exhibit Herod.

There are, of course, two histories here to consider in this light, the recurrence of the history we would sooner forget, and the recurrence of the one we must remember. Ironically, in an era when there is more information available than ever to the average person with access to the right side of the digital divide, subjects like history and philosophy seem to be casualties of the information age rather than its heroes. Knowledge is increasingly specialized, with increasing numbers of persons seeming to choose depth of information over breadth, perhaps overwhelmed by the sheer quantity of data about everything under the sun. The vastness of the choices makes synthesizing data daunting; it is far easier to become an expert about one thing than a competent commentator on a wide range of subjects. And so subjects like history, philosophy, and the humanities lose out to more specialized information, and the so-called Liberal Arts are on the wane, at least for a generation or two, and thus the possibility of repeating our historical errors becomes more likely, and we forget that Stalin murdered millions in Russia and for what?; and that African-American men in Alabama were misinformed and then purposefully denied treatment for syphilis to study that disease's effects, and for what?; and that church officials of every denomination denied the sexual abuse of children that took place by clergy under their watch, and for what? So we can wonder how it can happen again and again? And so, thank God that Matthew does not spare us the details of an atrocity like the slaughter of the innocents in a book

which still sells more copies each year than almost any other besides Harry Potter. For if the story of Herod's terror saves even one child its repetition, if it teaches even one person the folly of trying to outwit, outlast, or outplay God, it will have been worth our discomfort reading it so soon after Christmas. May the gift of the Bible, even with all its discomfoting moments, help us to avoid repeating our mistakes.

In addition to the history which we must not forget, there is also the history we must remember: the history of God making a way out of no way, the history of God working out God's purposes, the history of a promise keeping God. No fewer than three times in this passage does Matthew remind us of prophecies fulfilled, not to mention the undeclared allusions to Moses whom God saved similarly, and to the namesake of Jesus' father, the patriarch Joseph, whom God similarly led to Egypt. In all of these ways, Matthew is reminding us that our God is the God of history, and acts through history, and in spite of history to reveal the grace we celebrate at Christmas. God did not drop Jesus in Bethlehem like a paratrooper behind enemy lines to accomplish his mission on his own and neither are we left to our own devices to live in response to the gift of the Christ child. You see, we have the whole history of God's grace, including this episode, to remind us that God has never given up on us, not from the beginning of time, even if we have given up on God from time to time in our lives. That's why we have more than just the Christmas story, and more than just the Crucifixion story, to show us God's

presence with us across the breadth, as well as the depth, of our lives. Unjust, yes, the murder of innocent children, but not the last word. A savior on the run, yes, but a savior nonetheless. A king in hiding, yes, but a king who rules with compassion, and justice, and makes enemies for doing the right thing, rather than the wrong thing. All of these promises must be remembered all of the time, if we are to avoid falling victim to the same fears which filled Herod's heart, and Pharaoh's before him, and which forced their hands to bring suffering to those under their power even when it would do them absolutely no good.

I've spoken a bit about the power of history tonight, but I would be remiss if I left you with the impression that I am talking about ancient history. Yes, the story of the escape to Egypt and the slaughter of the innocents happened a long time ago, but it is not the end of the story of the great truths revealed therein. You see, the truth is that we are the living story, and that we give testimony to the grace and promises of God as we both remember the ancient story and tell our own stories of how God has kept promises, and made a way out of no way and worked God's purposes out in our own lives. Our testimony is in talking to our children and grandchildren about things that really matter, even if those conversations make us uncomfortable. Our testimony is to the least, the last, the lost, and the luckless in our service and generosity, even if that time and money really costs us something. Our testimony is in naming sin when we see it, in ourselves or in our systems, even if the road to repentance is a long, difficult, and painful one. May God help us in

all these ways to live the story, to remember and celebrate the history of God's grace in our midst, even in the midst of so much tragedy in the world. Amen.