

HOLY DISRUPTION

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Matthew 2:13-23

Here it is, the first day of a new year, just seven days since Christmas, and the scripture passage that I am reading to you describes the mass murder of children. Unbelievable. If I had been in charge of writing this gospel, I would have told the story bit differently. Remember those wise men, those magi from the east bearing opulent gifts fit for royalty? I would have ended it there. That's the high point of the story of the birth of Jesus—adoration.

But that is not where the story ends, is it?

So, how did we go from the birth of a child in Bethlehem to the slaughter of the innocents? The answer is fear.

In this gospel account, the one written by Matthew, the gospel begins with a lengthy genealogy of Jesus starting with Abraham and continuing through King David and on to Joseph and Mary. Then we have the account of Jesus' birth along with the explanation of why Joseph did not dismiss Mary when he discovered that she was pregnant.

Following the story of the birth, we are introduced to the magi—strangers from the East—who came in search of the child born as King of the Jews. They go to King Herod searching for the child and are directed to Bethlehem where they find him. But then, having been warned in a dream, they depart for home without going through Jerusalem and reporting back to Herod.

At the same time, an angel of the Lord came to Joseph in a dream and warned him to take his family and flee to Egypt because Herod was searching for the child to kill him. Joseph does as the angel directs, and under cover of darkness leads his wife and son out of Judea and south towards Egypt. The family remained in Egypt until Herod's death—a period of several years.

As a side note, many years ago, the church I served at the time hosted a pastor from Egypt. It was part of an exchange program between the American church and the Egyptian church. This pastor stayed with us for a week and lived in the home of a family in the congregation. One of the things he did was to make a presentation to the congregation about his work in Egypt. One person asked him just how long there had been a Christian church in Egypt. Because, honestly, we don't normally associate the Christian faith with that country. He responded by saying, "Ever since the holy family fled to Egypt to escape Herod." Arguably, that makes the Egyptian church the oldest church.

Back to our story: When Herod realized that the magi were not coming back with intel on the child who might be king, he was enraged. He dispatched soldiers with the order to kill all the children in and around Bethlehem that were two years old or younger. He figured that was the age of the child that the magi had told him about.

In time, Herod died, and an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and told him, *Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead.* And Joseph complied. He was wary of returning to Judea because the ruler there now was Herod's son, Archelaus, and he worried that it wouldn't be safe for them. Again, in a dream, he is directed to settle in the region called Galilee north of Judea. He does and makes a home for his family in the town of Nazareth in Galilee. As Matthew explains, this is to fulfill the word of the prophets, *He will be called a Nazorean.*

As I mentioned, we are just a week from Christmas. At my house, the decorations are still up. We're still basking in the warm glow of the Christmas season (as we try and forget the zero degree cold of Christmas day). We have the memories of gathered family, good food, gifts, hot chocolate and eggnog, and more. Wouldn't it be great to be able to hold that moment in time. Even though I put up our Christmas lights over a month ago, the time just seems to go by too quickly. I want to close my eyes and sing carols for just a bit longer. I want to celebrate the joy of the birth of the child.

But I can't, because there are consequences. There are powerful forces at work in our world that are opposed to this child and what his birth promises. His birth upsets the order of things.

His birth is what theologian Tom Long terms a holy disruption. Long points out that our faith is defined by disruptive forces such as Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, and others. These people aren't themselves disruptive; it is how God works through them that makes them agents of change. But as we know, the world does not like it when God intervenes.

Take, for example, King Herod. He's not a force of disruption, but rather the personification of opposition to God's plan. Herod is king of the Jews, but it is questionable if he is even Jewish. He inherited the throne from his father who was placed there by the Romans. Herod's power is based on a lie and he will do anything to hold on to that power.

When the magi come seeking the one born to be king of the Jews, Herod is terrified. He has everything to lose if a legitimate king is located. The Judeans are always on the edge of revolution. This would only incite them further. He will lose his wealth and power. And he will do anything and everything to hold on to what he has.

I love what the writer Kathleen Norris says about Herod in her book *Amazing Grace*. She points out that everything that Herod does is based on fear. She writes, “Herod symbolizes the terrible destruction that fearful people can leave in their wake if their fear is unacknowledged.” Herod slaughters children out of self-preserving, paranoid fear.

Killing children, of course, is extreme behavior. But we need to examine what things that we do in our everyday lives that we do out of fear. The first thing we must do is identify what we are afraid of. This can be difficult because too often we are terrified to face that we are in fact afraid. We don’t want to admit that we might be weak and vulnerable.

Chapman University out in California has, for the past nine years, put out a report they call Survey of American Fears.¹ In this report they track the top ten fears afflicting Americans. This year, for the eighth year running, the top fear of people is “corrupt government officials.” 62% of people are either “afraid” or “very afraid” of this. This has been the number one fear since 2015. Last year, this fear hit its all-time high of 80%. This year, it has dropped 18 points down to 62%. The remaining 9 fears can be grouped into 4 categories: harm to a loved one, war, environmental concerns, and economic concerns. Something else that the survey shows is that we are far more afraid of a loved one getting sick or dying than we are ourselves getting sick or dying.

Fear is real.

It was Herod’s fear that he would be stripped of his ill-gotten, ruthless, illegitimate power. Herod was afraid of the baby. He had no idea that it was God that he was fearing. He just knew that this toddler was a threat to his power and needed to be dealt with.

That’s what Jesus does. Jesus represents everything that is God—God’s love and mercy and righteousness. And these are the things that are terrifying to those who clothe themselves in darkness—the tyrants who oppress their people for their own entitlement, liars who fabricate misinformation for personal gain, warmongers who profit from violence, bullies who feel stronger when they belittle others, cowards when they vilify the innocent. These are the ones who cannot tolerate the presence of the Lord. For the goodness of the Lord reveals the darkness of their hearts.

As we see in this passage, the holy disruption of Jesus’ birth isn’t happenstance. It is part of a greater plan by God—a larger scheme of salvation. Three times in this passage Matthew offers us the words of prophets. Jesus becomes the fulfillment of

¹ <https://blogs.chapman.edu/wilkinson/2022/10/14/the-top-10-fears-in-america-2022/>

this prophecy. In addition, we witness God's protective hand in Joseph's dreams: take the child to Egypt, return to Israel, settle in Galilee. God is truly with us.

Today is the start of a new year and through this year I will be inviting all of us to address our fears, to face them, to acknowledge them, and then move past them. God calls us to be a people of joy, not fear. Our closing hymn today is "Joy to the World" which calls us to receive our king. When we are afraid, we are blinded to God's love for us. As the we read in the letter of 1 John, *There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear* (1 John 4:18). The perfect love of God set us free. As the psalmist says to God, *I will fear no evil, for you are with me* (Psalm 23). When we are free, we can see the endless possibilities of God's kingdom. Let us remember the words of Isaiah preached by John the Baptist as he announced the coming of the Messiah, *The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined* (9:2).

May God's light shine on us in this new year. Amen.