

Sunday December 25, 2022

## Lesson 4: The Holy Family Becomes Refugees

Scripture: Matthew 2: 13-15

### **Context:**

We end our unit “Power and Vulnerability” with a close to the nativity story. On this Christmas Day, we discuss events after the birth of Jesus as the holy family flees to Egypt for protection. Our focus will be on how Jesus threatened the status quo and social structures as he came in the name of God.

The gospel of Matthew does not spend as much time with the birth of the Christ child as the gospel of Luke does with giving us the setting of the birth and the initial visitors. Matthew focuses more on the genealogy of Jesus’ earthly father and the only detail of the birth scene is the visit of the mysterious Magi. Yet the gospel of Matthew also has a darker twist to the birth story of Jesus as introduced with the visit of the Magi.

As the Magi enter the story, we also meet King Herod. Herod was the puppet king set up by the Roman powers to-be as to give Israel some semblance of being their own people. Yet the stories of King Herod rarely portray him as a dignified monarch seeking to advocate and lead the people in his care.

Instead, Herod is focused on keeping his power and silencing any threats to his rule. Thus, when the Magi alert him to the birth of a newborn king, he seeks to destroy said infant by ordering a slaughter of male children in the community of Bethlehem. While there are no other sources beyond the biblical text of such an event, the actions would have fallen in line with Herod’s focus on control and his often impulsive executions of those he suspected as a threat.

Before the event can take place, Joseph is instructed by a dream to take his family to Egypt. The holy family become refugees as Herod’s capricious reign continues to focus on his slaughter of the innocents and those who threaten him. The family stays there until Herod dies and they can return to their homeland.

Verse fifteen speaks of this fulfilling prophecy given by those before who said: “I have called my son out of Egypt.” The prophet associated with this phrase is Hosea who states: “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.”<sup>1</sup> For the gospel writers like Matthew, it was of paramount importance to include details from the words of the prophets to explain events in Jesus’ life.

Yet this story of the holy family and the fleeing to Egypt also helps to provide allusions for Jesus’ identity. Herod’s murder of the infant boys of Bethlehem is strongly reminiscent of Pharaoh’s treatment of the male offspring of the Hebrew slaves in Egypt with infanticide.<sup>2</sup> Jesus, like Moses, is delivered of the horrific fate and will come to lead and redeem his people. And just like Moses, Jesus will take the people out of bondage and into something new despite the powers of the world trying otherwise.

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<sup>1</sup> Hos. 11: 1, NRSV.

<sup>2</sup> Hare, Douglas. “Matthew.” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2009), 17.

## Application

For good reason, Herod does not usually make the nativity scenes or Christmas pageants we've seen today or in years past. His presence, despite holding the physical power of the time, holds no relevance to our lives today. Like many others before and after him, his temporal power fades away as we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ and his ongoing reign in our world.

Yet even still, Herod plays a pivotal role in the nativity story as his actions show the importance of Jesus coming into the world. While a real, historical person, Herod can also represent to us today the various forces we see at work against proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ today. And much like Herod's slaughter of the innocents, we can see how power always attempts to block out the vulnerable and crush goodness.

As we observe Christmas today with hopefully a primary focus on rejoicing and celebration, we also acknowledge there is so much brokenness around us, particularly in the church. At times, we allow the King Herods into our hearts especially when we participate in division, isolation, and manipulation. It's so easy to do and all of us at some time have allowed those forces to consume us.

What we are reminded in this story is how Jesus comes to threaten all the powers of the world and remind us he is Lord. Even though we may persist in division, isolation, and manipulation, he will keep coming again and again to deliver and redeem us. It may not happen overnight and there might be hard years and days ahead. And yet, Jesus continues to come and push those who follow him to be transformed and restored.

On Christmas day, we are invited to celebrate the good news of how God came in the flesh to be with humanity. God could have chosen multiple ways to come to the world, but the way God chose was the one to cost greatly: God in the flesh. It is a reminder to us all of how God came to bring hope out of despair, joy out of fickleness, and resurrection out of death. God will not be tainted by the powers of the world, and even with the best attempts of humanity to sabotage, God will continue to speak from generation to generation. God will continue to lead us even as we walk in darkness, always shining a light ahead.

So what is our response to when we face the King Herods of the world? He will come again and again, and he comes in different ways. Perhaps what we are called to do is to remember to not let go. We are called to cling to Jesus and one another as he continues to come again and again.

In a book collection of sermons titled *Home By Another Way*, Episcopal priest and writer Barbara Brown Taylor tells the story of visiting an aged parishioner who could not remember much, yet could remember a time clear as day from her teenage years. The parishioner had gone hiking with some girlfriends on what started as a beautiful spring day. They got to the top of a mountain and marveled at the view. Yet suddenly, the clouds came in and the girls began to panic as a dense fog settled over them. Having no flashlights, the only way to get down was to hold onto one another and make their way down. They of course argued about this way or that way. And they had to take breaks to catch their breath. Yet one thing they could not and would not do is let go of the hand of the person next to them. They were the light for one another.

On Christmas Day we celebrate someone who came to be our light. He of course had those who tried to extinguish him, even early on as a tiny infant. He was not vanquished and he came again and again to deliver humanity. He does the same with us today, holding our hands in the dark. Yet he also invites us to reach out to those around us and not be afraid of the world around us. Even as the King Herods lurk seeking to divide, isolate, and fill us with rage and bitterness, Jesus tells us to not let go. He comes to bring us to the light and to lead us to life

anew. He comes to change our systems and our allegiances. He comes to deliver and save the world.

What are the King Herod forces you see at work today? How can we celebrate Christmas as a day of deliverance from ourselves? What traditions do you celebrate today to be reminded of the power of the Christmas story? Why is reading all the nativity story so important? How will you praise God today as we celebrate God incarnate?

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