

After The Magi

Texts: Isaiah 63: 7-9; Matthew 2: 1-23

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Christmas is a time of laughter and of joy. It's a time of children playing and shouting and leaping and running. We celebrate the birth of Jesus the Savior, Emmanuel, God with us, with gifts and gift cards, with music and songs, with prayers and feasting.

The Bible story is great. It's got Magi from the east, shepherds from the fields, angels from heaven, gifts and praise and announcements of glad tidings and good news. It's all about a celebration, a party.

The art that it has inspired is beautiful, with Mary and Joseph and the Magi and the shepherds and the angels and the halos all in a glow of light around the baby Jesus, while outside it's dark. Jesus himself seems to be providing all the light they need in that stable, illumining the faces that gaze down on him in wonder.

It's an idyllic scene. But the art has it right. While there is light inside the stable, and that light is coming from Jesus, outside it is still darkness. Jesus is barely shining brightly enough to light the faces. Even the rest of the stable remains in semi-darkness. Outside, it is still the depth of night, a murky blackness that threatens to come back inside.

Like a dream that suddenly turns terrifying, like a nightmare from which we awake bolt upright drenched in sweat, into the midst of this celebration and glory drops this bombshell from Matthew: Herod sent his soldiers to kill all the babies two-years old and younger.

It's usually referred to as the Slaughter of the Innocents, which sounds so euphemistically unlike what it should be called, the Murder of the Babies. The darkness outside just got really dark.

It's like a punch in the gut.

Angels and shepherds and wise men with gifts surrender to hacking soldiers, dying babies, weeping mothers.

King Herod was determined that *his* children were going to sit on *his* throne, and not even God was going to keep that from happening.

“The Messiah has come, the anointed King of Israel? Great!” says King Herod the puppet of Rome, “Let’s throttle him now and be done with it.”

This is not what we expect. We expect joy. We expect celebration. We expect things will start to get better now that Jesus is in the world. Instead, they got worse.

What happened to the angels? Why didn’t they stop it? What happened to the wise men? Why didn’t they go back and tell Herod they were wrong, that they had found nothing and no one? What happened to the shepherds? Why didn’t they fight to save their children?

We don’t know. The Bible doesn’t tell us.

What happened to God with us? Where was he? That the Bible does tell us.

It tells us that Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus, God with us, are caught up in the fear, caught up in the pain, caught up in the violence, running from it like everyone else, all the way to Egypt.

Though they escaped from Herod on that night when so many other children didn’t, the Bible tells us that there is no exemption for Joseph and Mary and Jesus in the end, not in the long run, not after all.

For Herod’s *son*, you see, whose throne was preserved that horrible night, is that *other* King Herod who will one day finish the job his father began and kill the *one* baby who escaped that bloody massacre, handing him back over to the Romans to be crucified, leaving his mother to weep at the foot of a cross.

Mary’s tears for her son were joined, in the end, with all the tears of all the mothers who lost their babies the night that Herod’s soldiers came. There is no exemption from suffering for Mary’s son, or God’s.

Where was God with us, Immanuel? God was there, with us, a baby, one of the innocents, a victim of Herod, if not on that day, then on another. God was where God always is, with the suffering, a part of it.

The artists have it right. God's light was shining, but it had just come into the world. It was only illuminating a small stable. It hadn't spread yet.

In the midst of our joyous celebrations, Matthew rushes in to tell us that there is still evil in the world, even after the birth of the Savior, to jar us with the news that even the birth of the Prince of Peace hasn't stopped the violence and hatred.

But that, my dear Matthew, we already knew. We don't need you to tell us that, we just need the newspaper. There is light shining in the darkness, but there is still plenty of darkness left. Babies in cages at our border, parents weeping over their lost abducted children; bombs dropping in the Middle East, and Iran, the home of the wise men, the latest target in the never-ending wars.

The birth of the Messiah is not enough to stop it, the death of the Messiah is not enough to stop it, even the resurrection of the Messiah is not enough to stop it. Only the return of the Messiah will be enough to stop it entirely, and for that we are still waiting.

In the great mystery of the Christmas story, we often forget that Jesus birth was not greeted with universal joy, that the joy was shattered like the stillness of the night by the boots of soldiers.

We think of Jesus' birth as such a wonderful and miraculous event that we are tempted to forget this little story about the slaughter of the innocents, the murder of the babies, and to pass over these few verses and the horrible deeds which king Herod committed just after the birth of Christ in the first attempt on Jesus' life.

Our gospel text today brings us up short. It reminds us how opposition to Jesus arose immediately upon his birth. It reminds us that salvation comes at great cost and with tears. It reminds us that the light is shining in the darkness, but there's still plenty of darkness yet to be overcome.

Matthew doesn't want us to become complacent. He doesn't want us to have false hopes and misleading expectations that all will be well. He reminds us that Christmas is just the beginning and that God still has much work to do to set this fallen world of ours to rights once again.

But in the midst of all of the suffering that remains in the world, Matthew also wants us to know that God does not ultimately exempt Godself from it. Jesus

doesn't die *that day* at Herod's hands, but he will die *one day* at the hands of a king Herod.

Jesus Emmanuel, God with us, but God joins us in the midst of our suffering, in the midst of our fear, in the midst of all the evil and violence that is in the world, and God in human flesh suffers with us, first as a refugee in a foreign land, and then back home at the hands of the powerful.

Jesus is born, the light is shining in the darkness, but it isn't over yet. The dawn is just coming, the day of the Lord is still to come.

But here and now, in all that we go through, no matter how terrible, at least we know that God is with us. We are not alone anymore. God has gone through it before us.

Even when death comes, we know that God in Jesus Christ has been there first, has gone through it and emerged triumphantly on the other side, that he is able to take us through with him, and bring us safely home.

It is a shock to have this terrible story thrust in our faces right after Christmas when all we want to do is celebrate. But Matthew has a reason and a purpose for it. He knows that the celebrations will die down, and that soon enough the newspaper will have the next slaughter of innocents to report.

And when that sad news comes, Matthew doesn't want us to think that he wasn't expecting it. The good news of Jesus' birth doesn't mean an end to bad news – not yet, at least.

Matthew doesn't want us to think that as soon as Jesus comes we are suddenly living in some other world where everything is just peachy all the time. That's not realistic. That's living with blinders on.

But even though there is still going to be suffering, three things have changed. First, God is with us in the midst of our suffering, with us to the very end of time, as Jesus himself says at the end of Matthew's gospel.

And that makes a huge difference. We are understood. We are embraced with commiseration. We are comforted by one who has been there. We are no longer alone.

And second, now we know that there is more to the story of Jesus than just the birth. He is not the baby born to die, but the baby born to live and to bring life.

When Jesus is born, new life is followed by death, yes, says Matthew, that is true, but listen to the story I have to tell about Jesus, listen closely and you will find that with Jesus, death is followed by new life.

And third, we will now no longer be surprised that darkness is still trying to blot out the light of Jesus as we try to carry it more and more into our world today, and tomorrow, and every day.

As disciples of Jesus, we continue to witness to his light, and to spread the light of his mercy and love, to offer welcome to the outcast, shelter for the homeless, and food to the hungry. We would expect all those good things to be greeted with joy, but it may not be so. Darkness may still want to have a say, may still try to get the last word.

But we needn't fear even that, because it is God who has the last word, and it is a good one.

The mothers and the fathers of those poor babies are all gone now, all joined together in the dust of death. But because Jesus is in the world, the mothers and the fathers and the babies are alive with God, reunited in joy, tears turned once more to laughter and singing, and Jesus is there in their midst, calling the little children to come to him, for of such is the kingdom of God.

The story of Jesus begins with joy at the birth of the Savior. Then comes death, first for the babies, then for Jesus. But the story doesn't end there. Instead, it ends where it began, with joy again at the resurrection of Jesus, and the promise of resurrection for us all.

Thanks be to God for the birth of the Savior who brings laughter back after the time of tears. Amen