

The Life of Jesus

Sermon 2- Jesus and the Evil King

Passages: Revelation 12:1-6
Matthew 2:13-23

Did you know that twice as many Christians were killed for their faith in 2013 as in 2012? The top 10 nations "*where Christians faced the most pressure and violence*", according to Open Doors' World Watch List, were: **North Korea, Somalia, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Maldives, Pakistan, Iran and Yemen.**

What is important to point out, here, is how strongly the politics of a nation have a *direct impact* upon the Christian community in that nation. In all 10 cases, a large part of Christian persecution has been coming directly from the State—the powers in charge of the country.

It reminds me of today's story from **Matthew 2.**

But before we turn to that, let's pray.

Herod was appointed King of Judea by the Romans in 37 BC. It was a politically cunning move, for although Herod was of Arabic descent, he was a practicing Jew. This meant that he was both an 'insider' and an 'outsider'; a person who could get close, but not too close, to the people over which he was chosen to rule. Rome even gave him the title, '*King of the Jews*'; a title that Herod was clearly so proud of that he would do anything to keep.

As such, not only did Herod rule the people with an iron fist (using fear as his greatest weapon), he was able to extract huge taxes from them which kept Rome happy while rewarding the wealthy elite of Jerusalem with many new buildings, particularly a new temple. To put simply, **Herod was an extremely cunning ruler.**

And this explains much of the background for today's story.

When the Magi came to Jerusalem and inquired of Herod about the birth of a **new 'King of the Jews'**, this set off such an outrage in Herod that he immediately sent his troops to Bethlehem to massacre all the babies under two years of age. (Of course, we must remember that Mary and Joseph would

have stayed in Bethlehem for several months following Jesus' birth, perhaps as long as a year, long enough for Mary to complete the official period of 'confinement'. Since Herod would have had no idea exactly when the baby was born, his decision to kill all babies under 2 gave him confidence that he had eradicated any future challenge to his rule.)

Now, I know that many people wonder if this story could really be true. To begin with, it's hard for us to believe that anyone could be so ruthless as to murder innocent babies! And besides, there is no historical evidence other than this passage to tell us that this event actually took place. (Josephus, one of the most prominent first-century historians, never mentions it even though he described many other events in Herod's life.) Even more curious is the fact that none of the other three Gospels mentions this event. It begs the question: Did it really happen, or was this just a bit of *imaginative story-telling* from Matthew?

Let me give you **four good reasons** why I think the story is true:

First, history tells us that King Herod was certainly capable of this committing this atrocity! Did you know, for example, that Herod guarded his rule with such a high level of paranoia that he had his own wife and his three sons executed for (what he imagined were) conspiracies against him. We also know that he regularly used secret police to monitor and report the feelings of the general populace towards him, taking any protestors away by force. And just before he died, Herod had the leading citizens of Jericho slaughtered. Why? So that people would be in mourning at the time of his own funeral.

If you keep these atrocities in mind, you'll find it easy to believe that Herod had all the children of Bethlehem massacred.

The **second** reason why I think this story is true is the fact that first-century Bethlehem was quite a small village, with an estimated population of between three hundred and a thousand people. Experts tell us that the number of babies under the age of two would have only been *between 7 and 20*. Indeed, this could be the reason why Josephus never mentioned the murders! The deaths of a dozen or so children in a 'back woods' Jewish town would have been a relatively *unremarkable event* in the eyes of this secular historian.

The **third** reason why I think this story is true comes as a response to those who wonder why this story is recorded only in Matthew's Gospel. At first, it may seem suspicious, but when we consider that Mark and John start their Gospels with Jesus' baptism and thus don't even mention Jesus' childhood, it

begins to make more sense. So, what about Luke? Well, Luke doesn't mention the massacre either, but he does record Mary's song (the Magnificat)—a song in which Mary extols the fact that her child will ***“bring down the mighty from their thrones and lift up the humble.”*** Clearly, these two Gospels agree that, from the day of his birth, Jesus was a political threat, upsetting the power-games of the high and mighty.

(This political tension is confirmed again in the story we read from Revelation 12, where the child...Jesus... is pursued by the dragon...Herod? Satan?...and has to flee... Egypt?)

What's more, the bigger picture that's presented in all four Gospels means that this story fits perfectly with all the political power-struggles that will develop over Jesus lifetime as he and the Roman Empire collide (the culmination of which will be *the crucifixion!*). Indeed, you could say that this story from Matthew 2 acts as a precursor to the story about the cross, for at the cross Rome finally thinks it has eliminated this political trouble-maker!

What I'm saying is that Matthew's story about the massacre of Bethlehem's infants (and the subsequent flight to Egypt) conforms perfectly to the political machinations of all 4 Gospels.

There's **one final reason** why I believe that this story is true. As Matthew so clearly understood, this awful story fulfils many prophecies of the OT. In general terms, the prophets forewarned that, from the day of His arrival, the Messiah would suffer a great deal of opposition. (Herod was simply Jesus' earliest opponent.) The prophets had also announced that, although Israel's redeemer would come to liberate his people and bring justice to the world, this would come at a high price. (In this story, the price Jesus paid was exile to Egypt.)

But there's far more prophetic connection than this going on in today's passage. Surprisingly, Matthew selects some pretty obscure texts from the OT and directly applies them to these events.

First, in verse 15, Matthew quotes from Hosea 11 -- ***‘Out of Egypt I called my son’***. It's really a bizarre quote considering that Hosea's prophecy originally referred to the flight of God's firstborn son (the people of Israel) *out of* slavery

in Egypt into the Promised Land of Israel. But what Matthew does is to take that prophecy and reverse it, applying to Jesus' flight *out of* Israel and back into Egypt. It is bizarre-- a reversal of history!

But, when you stop and think about it, you can see what Matthew is doing. He's inviting us to watch this child (the new Israel) go back to Egypt in order to begin all over again. For in this child, God's **new** Exodus will now unfold. God's true 'son' will come out of Egypt in the power of the Holy Spirit, empowered to live without corruption and without sin. Jesus, the new people of God, will succeed where Israel had failed. ***'Out of Egypt I called my son'***.

The same thing is done in verse 18, when Matthew quotes from the OT prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah 31 was first uttered in the time of Israel's exile. When Jeremiah spoke about ***"Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted because her children are no more..."***, he was referring to Israel's recent experience of exile. You see, Rachel (Jacob's favourite wife) had been buried in Ramah and her offspring inhabited the region. That's why she weeps—because this town had experienced heavy losses of its population during the invasion by the Babylonians.

And so, what Matthew is keen to show us is how Herod's massacre of the children of Bethlehem has clear parallels with the persecution and exile of God's people throughout history. *And yet*, even in the midst of persecution and destruction comes hope—the hope that there is a child...one of the exiles... one who miraculously escaped persecution...will return from his exile to lead God's people back into the Promised Land. Though Israel must now weep and mourn for her lost children... even though everything seems bleak and hopeless... **rescue is on the way! The Messiah has come!**

Matthew's final OT quote, found in verse 23, is even more obscure. Matthew wants to help us understand why Mary and Joseph chose to settle down in the little town of Nazareth, in northern Israel. And so, he quotes an unidentified OT prophet(s) who supposedly said, ***"He will be called a Nazarene"***. The only problem is, this so-called prophecy is nowhere to be found in the OT!

What scholars now believe is that Matthew was deliberately creating an interesting word play around the name ***"Nazareth"***. You see, the town of Nazareth didn't even exist during the OT era. (Whatever was there earlier had

been destroyed by the invading Assyrian and Babylonian armies.) It was re-settled during the time of the Romans by those who had returned from exile. These settlers decided to name their town “*Nazareth*”, a name derived from the Hebrew word for 'branch', *ne-ṣer*. They did this to remind them of their greatest hope—the coming Messiah—who, in the prophecy of Isaiah 11, was said to be a **branch** from the root of Jesse. Let me read the opening verses of Isaiah 11 to you.

***Then a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse,
And a branch (ne-ṣer) from his roots will bear fruit.***

***² The Spirit of the LORD will rest on Him,
The spirit of wisdom and understanding,
The spirit of counsel and strength,
The spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.***

***³ And He will delight in the fear of the LORD,
And He will not judge by what His eyes see,
Nor make a decision by what His ears hear;***

***⁴ But with righteousness He will judge the poor,
And decide with fairness for the afflicted of the earth;
And He will strike the earth with the rod of His mouth,
And with the breath of His lips He will slay the wicked.***

***⁵ Also righteousness will be the belt about His loins,
And faithfulness the belt about His waist.***

As I said, the key word in Isaiah 11 which describes the Messiah is the Hebrew word ‘*ne-ṣer*’ which means ‘branch’. This is the same word from which the town of **Nazareth** got its name. Clearly, the returning exiles who settled here strongly believed that a new beginning for the royal house of David would come from their town, Nazareth!

And this is what Matthew is latching hold of! He can see that, despite the frantic and tragic events surrounding Jesus’ birth, God was never in a panic! He had a plan; a plan that He had been working out over many generations; a plan that would eventually bring salvation and rescue to His beleaguered yet hopeful people through none other than Mary and Joseph’s tiny baby...the Messiah. This child “**will be called a Nazarene**”—He will be called “a **branch bearer**”...one who will be raised in the city of the branch, **Nazareth!**

I hope you can catch a glimpse of Matthew’s excitement here. In the end, his short story about the evil King Herod...about his extreme violence and

cruelty...**is not a story which should cause us to lose heart.** To the contrary, **it is a story of hope!** For in the midst of all the evil of this world, we see God's Saviour...a Saviour who comes to us in the midst of our mess, and our suffering, and our struggles (and even in the loss of our children)...in order to show us a greater reality (seen in Revelation 12)—that God is sovereign and has a plan to utterly overthrow the world's great enemy and destroy him.

As Matthew knows so well, God and His Messiah (the Branch of Jesse) will not be thwarted!

Let's stand and pray the Lord's Prayer together.