

## Christmas in Time of Terror

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It has been so since the beginning: Christmas in time of terror. The Christmas story in Matthew contains it: the slaughter of the innocents in Bethlehem. It is the lectionary text being preached around the world today, an urgent message, if we dare preach it. December 28 in the western church and December 29 in the eastern church are called the Feast of the Holy Innocents, making sure we do not forget terror in Christmas time.

### I

This world is so full of beauty and terror, and Christ is with us in both. The story begins with beauty: The Three Wise Men traveling across the desert from Persia, what is Iran today. They studied the stars and read the stars; and they read ancient texts of holy prophecies. Reading the night sky and the books they determined a new king was born in Judah. So they loaded their camels with gifts and provisions to see the child.

When they got to Jerusalem, they first consulted King Herod. They told him of the child born to be king and inquired where he might have been born. *Bad*

*idea!* Herod loved his spectacular building projects but ruled with ruthless power and was consumed with paranoia. At one point he murdered his wife and her mother and three of his sons so to protect his power. A historian of the time wrote: “It is better to be a pig in Herod’s house than a son”.

So when the Wise Men said to Herod, “Where is he who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East and have come to worship him”, Herod’s paranoia went through the roof.

He consulted the court priests and scholars who were always there to serve him. Where is the child to be born? They looked in their books and said, “Bethlehem”.

Herod called the Wise Men in for a secret meeting—kings love secret meetings—and named Bethlehem as the place of the birth. “Search diligently for the child”, he told them, barely able to conceal the malice in his voice, “and when you have found him, come back and tell me where, so that I may come and worship him.” There was no truth anywhere in his heart of darkness.

## II

The Wise Men arrived in Bethlehem, found the child and offered their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. They knelt before him and worshipped him. Thus has come uncountable thousands of paintings, stories and songs.

Then a dream came to them warning them not to return to Herod as they had promised. So they departed to their country “by another way”. Sometimes we all need to return home by another way.

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the Wise Men he flew into a murderous rage. He sent his troops to kill every male child under two years of age in Bethlehem. That would solve the problem.

Jesus’ life was saved by a dream given to Joseph. Remember earlier when Joseph had obeyed another dream when he heard Mary was with child? The angel told him not to be afraid, to go ahead and marry her and care for the child as his own. Now Joseph saves Jesus’ life for a second time. The angel in the dream warned him of Herod’s plan and of his troops on the way to Bethlehem to kill their son. Joseph rose from the dream and fled with Mary and their child to Egypt.

I have loved those paintings through the years of the Holy Family on their way to Egypt. There’s one that especially arrests my imagination: Mary, Joseph, Jesus and the donkey amid the Pyramids. Refugees from terror, they had found safety in Egypt.

But back in Bethlehem Herod’s soldiers slaughtered every male child in the village. And Matthew quotes Jeremiah:

A voice is heard in Ramah  
wailing and loud lamentation,  
Rachel weeping for her children.

I saw a 19<sup>th</sup> century painting by Cogniet this week. A woman is holding her child around the corner of a building, trying to hide from the approaching troops, her face filled with terror. I wanted to look away, but could not.

### III

We have no outside historical record of this event. It was a small massacre after all. In a village of 200-300 families maybe 20 or so children were slaughtered. And children's deaths are rarely considered important enough to remember in the larger scheme of things.

But we remember. We must remember. We must make record of every child's death and the suffering of all children. We must love with our prayer and holy action the little ones the world overlooks.

Mary, Joseph and Jesus were refugees fleeing violence and death, as tens of thousands around the world today are fleeing death and violence to find some new home of safety.

Last week in the Christmas message of Pope Francis he addressed this world-wide crisis and urged Christians around the world to care for the

immigrants made emigrants by “injustice”. We must not, he said, turn away from them behind “walls of indifference”.

In America today we are making a mockery of the Statue of Liberty, turning almost all away who wish to come. We turn our faces away from the policies of our government separating families at the border, placing 10,000 plus children in holding pens, depriving them of basic medical care and with no capacity of ever re-uniting them with their families. Children torn from their mother’s arms.

And what about our children killed by gun violence and at our schools. Since the Sandy Hook massacre of children in 2012 more than 7,000 children have been killed by guns, a greater number than all our soldiers killed in combat since 9/11 in 2001. Perhaps the Feast of the Holy Innocents should be our Memorial Day for them.

And what about children in poverty? The Children’s Defense Fund is dedicated to the care of children particularly children of poverty. Here are some current numbers.

-Five million children in our nation live in extreme poverty, on less than \$9.00 a day.

-21.2% of children in N.C. live in poverty.

-73% of our children in poverty are children of color.

These statistics can be overwhelming and even immobilize us who care.

But I see the great work you do in this congregation for children, our children, homeless children, school children. I see teachers who call their students “My children”. My children! I see you working for policies, local, state, national, that protect and benefit children. I see you following the words of Mother Teresa of Calcutta: “Do small things with great love.”

Just to pay attention to the child in front of you is a way of following the Christ who came as a child as vulnerable as any child who ever lived.

Maybe one of the great callings of Christmas is to say with our teachers, “These are my children.”

After the killing of Jews at worship in Pittsburg a couple of years ago, we went to Congregation Emanuel to worship with them and remember. On their bulletin were these words from the Talmud:

Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world’s grief. Do justly now, love mercy now, walk humbly now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it.

The Christian movement has for 2,000 years been a “Children Matter” movement. Let us take heart, take courage, this day. Jesus said,

I have spoken these things to you that in me you will have peace. In this world you have tribulation, but be of good courage; I have overcome this world.

We don't always see this peace, this overcoming, but we know in him what it looks like.

There's a medieval Advent carol I love called "Thou shalt know him when he comes":

Thou shalt know him when he comes

Not be any din of drums,

Nor his manners not his airs

Nor by anything he wears,

Thou shalt know him when he comes

Not by a crown or a gown

But his coming known shall be

By the holy harmony

Which his coming makes in thee.

Thou shalt know him when he comes

And so we pray with the earliest Christians, their ancient cry:

"Come, Lord Jesus Come!"

Come Lord Jesus, come, and when you come, and as you come, count us in.