

Contents

Christmas 1

And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee.

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• *Lectionary Readings (Year A)*

Revised Common Lectionary

First Reading	Isaiah 63:7-9
Second Reading	Hebrews 2:10-18
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Matthew 1:18-25

- 1 Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and
2 said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there
3 until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." Then
4 Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and
5 remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken
6 by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son."
- 7 When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and
8 he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old
9 or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was
10 fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:
- 11 "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for
12 her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more."
- 13 When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in
14 Egypt and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel,
15 for those who were seeking the child's life are dead." Then Joseph got up, took the
16 child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that
17 Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go
18 there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee.
19 There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken
20 through the prophets might be fulfilled, "He will be called a Nazorean."

Exploring the Pattern: Themes and Motifs

Most biblical scholars agree that the story of Herod's slaughter of the innocents and the flight of Mary, Joseph, and the babe into Egypt are symbolic, mythic, and even archetypal. Only the most literal-minded read today's texts from Matthew as historical fact. It is important, however, to remember the wise words of the novelist Tim O'Brien who said, "Just because it didn't happen doesn't mean it isn't true." During this Christmas season the challenge is to explore how these stories help Matthew describe, for his day and ours, who Jesus is and to wonder how the story continues to happen around and within us.

1. Begin by "reading" the story of the "Flight Into Egypt" through the eyes of several artists. Paintings and sculpture can easily be found with the help of Google. Search on the Internet for this art title under the names of Giotto (a fresco in Padua), Vittore Carpaccio (National Gallery in D.C.), Joachim Beuckelaer (Antwerp) and the Gaudi sculpture in Barcelona. Take some time to sit with these versions of the story.

[See the *BWB* website (www.bibleworkbench.org) for links to several of these works. If you do not have access to the Internet, you can find these and other artists' portrayals of the Flight into Egypt in art books on your shelf or at the local library. Should you be unable to find any such art work, you still can explore the texts by using the questions that follow.]

How would you describe what is happening for Mary, Joseph, and the babe as they flee into Egypt? What are they fearing and hoping?

As they travel by night into the unknown in search of safety, what do you imagine they say to one another? What are the whispers as the three huddle close in strange places in a foreign land?

The text begins with *Now after they had left*. . . "They," of course, are the wise men or magi who Matthew tells us have come from the east following the star. What does their journey and discovery tell Matthew's readers about Jesus? Why do they go home by another way, avoiding Herod?

At the Workbench: Christmas 1

Seeing he has been tricked, Herod is *infuriated*. Pause for a moment and let yourself feel being “infuriated.” What does it do to you? What happens to your body? What is the color of infuriation? What does it taste, sound, and smell like?

Go to Google again. This time type in: <http://www.fixcas.com/parody/herod.htm>. A group called VOCA (Voices of Children Alliance) is waiting to show you this story in a rich array of artists portraying “The Holy Innocents” or “Slaughter of the Innocents.” Take some extra time with Giotto, Bruegel, Cogniet, and Carl Bloch.

Why is Herod angry enough to slaughter all those children? What is he attempting to kill? How would you describe what he is hoping to destroy and what he is wanting to preserve? What fear do you suppose may be at the root of his anger?

2. Who are the people in power and control in your world who are intent upon killing the babe? What do you know of world leaders, terrorists and peace makers, teachers and ministers, corporate executives and Wall Street brokers, insurance agents and drug managers who will spare nothing to preserve the status quo, maintain rule, ensure their profit and keep the world the way they want it?

Who are the Herods on the evening news, in your company or factory, in your school or church, across the street, down the block, or on the other side of the room? How are these Herods seeking to destroy possibility and maintain the status quo?

Google one more time. Type in “Regina Coeli deWinter—The Slaughter of the Innocents.” What is the artist showing or telling you? What of your world is in this painting?

Exploring the Pattern: Themes and Motifs

Matthew 2:13-23 • December 26, 2010

What is the babe, the hope, the possibility, or the vision that the Herods you name want to destroy?
What is the fragile, vulnerable, and easily broken or bruised dream that Herod is intent on killing?

3. What have you ever known of a Herod within you who gets nervous and angry when you conceive a new possibility for yourself? How does your Herod sense danger in your fragile and tentative dream or hope? When have you met your inner Herod intent on crippling your body with aches and pains, robbing your energy by insomnia, or stealing your enthusiasm by anxiety and fears?

What is the name of a babe your Herod has slain?

In this Advent season of 2010, what is one hope or possibility that is gestating in your heart and soul? What longs to be born within you? Who are the Herods around and within you who are going to be threatened by the birth—whose influence and control over you will be challenged? How might all your Herods seek to slay the babe? How might your inner Mary and Joseph escape to safety? Where is an Egypt in which the babe may wait until the Herods are either dead or have stepped down from their throne?

Reading Between the Lines

“A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.”

Matthew offers Herod's massacre of children as a “fulfillment” of the “prophecy,” found in Jeremiah 31:15. Yet, this image of Rachel, the matriarch of Israel, weeping for her children seems less a prophecy than a description of the tragic state of the people of Israel in exile, as yet unredeemed. How many other times in the past and even today is Jeremiah's description “fulfilled”? Where do you find mothers weeping for their children in the pages of the morning newspaper, on the TV, in your own day-to-day living? What kind of “fulfillment” might these mothers wish for, hope for, dream of?



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What warning may have startled you awake when you were peacefully asleep? Whose voice warned you of danger? Was it a friend's? a financial adviser's? a doctor's? a boss's? a lover's? Or may it have been some internal voice that spoke when you were loading the dishwasher or driving to yet another meeting? Having heard such a voice, to what strange places might people like us flee when threatened? How might an alien refuge seem welcoming? How might it seem just as frightening as the place we started from?

And after a sojourn to an alien refuge, what news, what new conditions could have told you it was time to go back? How may you have found it possible and impossible to return to the exact place you started from? What difference have your fear and your flight made in your life?



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Reading Between the Lines

Call Me Herod

for the sword
I took to his soul—
and mine—
when in a fit
of fury I cried,
“What’s wrong
with you?”

The tears of
his slaughtered
innocence, like
the waters of
Mnemosyne,
stung ancient
wounds and
awakened me
to the truth
of my own
brutality.

Kathie Collins

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Herod. The guy we love to hate. The one who was so fearful of losing power that he killed several of his sons and his (theoretically) beloved wife Marianne. This was the Herod that constructed one of the wonders of the ancient world on the site of the rebuilt temple, a testament to his own greatness. (It was destroyed in 70 C.E. by the Romans led by Titus, leaving only what is now called the Wailing Wall, and ruins archeologists are still excavating.) He had something to prove and something to protect.

So, let’s look as carefully as we can at this inner Herod. What is it in our inner or outer world that we would kill to protect? What is the grand plan we see as our life’s work? Where is it in our inner landscape we find ourselves getting ruthless, even murderous? Where in our most intimate relationships are we most deadly?

These explorations may not be the stuff of group discussion—but it might be important nevertheless to know where the monsters are in our closet or under our bed, so our Joseph can have some idea when to leave town. And so our most cherished and holy vulnerabilities have an opportunity to grow into something bigger.

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Parallel Readings

From Newsweek

Crisis of Confidence

The economy was already faltering when I arrived at Italy's Lake Como in the spring of 2008. I was there for a seminar on commerce and finance, one of those Davos-like gatherings where the rainmakers of global capitalism wander around fountains and confide in each other. But the mood was bleak that year, and the rumble of approaching economic thunder accented all discussion. Instead of being a time to relax and share, it became a time for worry and reflection—about a system that suddenly seemed to be built on sand instead of rock, and about the whole direction of economic and social development.

The global recession of the last few years has begun to pass. But while the outlines of a more temperate, more sober capitalism are coming into focus, I find myself wondering about the people—myself included—who will work within it. Where did we fall short? What do we do to better shape the future? And, beneath it all, what have we learned about ourselves as human beings? These more personal aspects of the financial crisis have preoccupied me greatly in recent months, not only as someone who has spent his professional life in banking but also as an ordained minister in the Church of England.

We are all guilty of compartmentalization, of dividing our lives into separate realms with different rules—and nowhere is this sin more obvious than at work. The office risks becoming a neutral world where questions of worth (other than shareholder value), of rightness (as opposed to what is lawful), or of wisdom (as distinct from what is practical) need not arise. But they are questions we need to face if we are to find a path of fulfillment, for both ourselves and the world in general.

We may never get there. But our renewed progress—and our personal happiness—depends on our commitment to certain guiding ideals. The first is to work with integrity—to be honest, trustworthy, and committed to the exchange of value for value. Other principles follow naturally: treat other people as ends in and of themselves, not just as means to an end; aspire to contribute the most, not to receive the most; strive for balance between family, friendship, and work; and, if you should find yourself in a leadership position, focus on service rather than power. Underpinning all these notions is the abil-

Stephen Green, "Crisis of Confidence," *Newsweek*, May 3, 2010, p. 12. Green is chairman of HSBC and author of *Good Value: Reflections on Money, Morality, and an Uncertain World*.

ity to ask ourselves, “What is the value of what I do?”—and to find an answer that satisfies.

These principles are nothing new. But the era of globalization—which has brought us into contact with more people around the world—has given them a greater relevance and urgency than at any previous stage in human history. Of course, they may yet go unheeded as we continue to ignore our moral compass in exchange for a nice car, a large house, and trips to Lake Como (where the names of the hotels all sound like expensive puddings). But I hope not. If we listen to the voice of conscience, it reminds us that something is owed by the affluent. This includes extensive giving—which should be at a level that is material for the giver. But no less important is the donating of time and talent. We have, after all, one life. And when it comes to how we spend it, the sayings are all true: you can’t take your money with you, professional success doesn’t make you happy, and you can eat only three meals a day.

Stephen Green

From *O’Neill*

Lazarus Laughed

Caligula—(*dully*) I cannot understand. I hate men. I am afraid of their poison and their swords and the cringing envy in their eyes that only yields to fear!

Lazarus—(*gaily mocking*) Tragic is the plight of the tragedian whose only audience is himself! Life is for each man a solitary cell whose walls are mirrors. Terrified is Caligula by the faces he makes! But I tell you to laugh in the mirror, that seeing your life gay, you may begin to live as a guest, and not as a condemned one! (*raising his hands for silence—with a playful smile*) Listen! In the dark peace of the grave the man called Lazarus rested. He was still weak, as one who recovers from a long illness—for, living, he had believed his life a sad one! (*He laughs softly, and softly they all echo his laughter.*) He lay dreaming to the croon of silence, feeling as the flow of blood in his own veins the past reenter the heart of God to be renewed by faith into the future. He thought: “Men call this death”—for he had been dead only a little while and he still remembered. Then, of a sudden, a strange gay laughter trembled from his heart as though his life, so long repressed in him by fear, had found at last its voice and a song for singing. “Men call this death,” it sang. “Men call life death and fear it. They hide from it in horror. Their lives are spent in hiding. Their fear becomes their living. They worship life as death!”

Eugene O’Neill

Eugene O’Neill, “Lazarus Laughed,” from *O’Neill: Complete Plays 1920-1931*, (New York: Library of America, 1988), pp. 572-573.

From *New & Selected Poems*

A Secret Life

Why you need to have one
is not much more mysterious than
why you don't say what you think
at the birth of an ugly baby.
Or, you've just made love
and feel you'd rather have been
in a dark booth where your partner
was nodding, whispering yes, yes,
you're brilliant. The secret life
begins early, is kept alive
by all that's unpopular
in you, all that you know
a Baptist, say, or some other
accountant would object to.
It becomes what you'd most protect
if the government said you can protect
one thing, all else is ours.
When you write late at night
it's like a small fire
in a clearing, it's what
radiates and what can hurt
if you get too close to it.
It's why your silence is a kind of truth.
Even when you speak to your best friend,
the one who'll never betray you,
you always leave out one thing;
a secret life is that important.

Stephen Dunn

Stephen Dunn, "A Secret Life" from *New & Selected Poems: (1974-1994)*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc., 1994), p. 272. Reprinted by permission.

Critical Background

From Scripting Jesus

The Slaughter of the Children (Matthew 2:13-23)

A similar conclusion emerges from the story of the slaughter of the children and the resultant flight to Egypt, both of which are unique to the Gospel of Matthew. The first point to note is that the slaughter of the children is suspect on historical grounds. Other than this passage in the Gospel of Matthew, there is no other historical record that such an event occurred at any time during the reign of Herod, or his sons. Josephus carefully documents the final, rather tragic years of Herod's life, especially his ruthless treatment of his own sons. Several of them were killed or executed publicly due to Herod's paranoia about plots to overthrow him. In each case, however, the son was already an adult. Josephus never mentions a massacre of other children, and especially not a conscious campaign to target "children [lit., boys] age two and under in and around Bethlehem" (Matt 2:16). One would think that such an unusual and horrifying event would have left some historical traces. As a result, Raymond Brown, among many others, considers this story to be a Matthean creation, a case of literary *verisimilitude*:

And so once more we are led to verisimilitude. There are serious reasons for thinking that the flight to Egypt and the massacre at Bethlehem may not be historical. Yet, at the same time, if one can trace the basic story to another origin, there are good clues to why it has been cast in its present form.

By verisimilitude Brown means a story that gives the appearance of being real when it is not, and more specifically one that creates its aura of "factuality" by being based on some other, usually well-known, legend or event. In fact, both elements come from the Moses tradition. Brown argues that Matthew's version is modeled directly on the story of Moses's birth and the pharaoh's attempt to kill all the male children of the Israelites age two and under (Exod 1:22-2:4). Thus, the age of the male children comes from the Moses tradition and serves as literary allusion rather than as temporal framework for the Matthean narrative. Most scholars would agree.

The prophecy-fulfillment quotations so characteristic of the Matthean birth narrative also point to the Moses-Joshua (or Egypt-Exodus) tradition as background for the story. These

L. Michael White, *Scripting Jesus: The Gospels in Rewrite*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), pp. 239-241.

motifs can be seen clearly in the slaughter of the children and flight to Egypt sequence:

This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt have I called my son." (Matt 2:15)

At the same time, the fact that Jesus was known to be a Galilean from Nazareth is central to all the Gospel narratives, especially the Passion tradition.

This quotation is taken from Hosea, where it is clearly a reference to the Exodus; the "son" or "child" mentioned there is explicitly Israel itself: "When Israel was a child I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son" (11:1). This retrospective statement of Hosea is thus transformed by the Matthean author into a "prophecy" to predict the movements of Joseph, Mary, and Jesus at the level of the narrative. The return from Egypt and detour to Nazareth is similarly cited as a fulfillment of scripture: "He will be called a Nazorean" (Matt 2:23). It is based loosely on the wording of Isaiah 11:1, likewise taken out of context: "A shoot shall come from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots."

It appears, then, that both the Lukan and Matthean authors have freely created scenes that propel the geographical flow of the narrative and travel of the characters within the story. At the same time, the resultant plotline in Matthew is radically different from that in Luke. They are, in fact, narratively incompatible. In Matthew Herod's slaughter of the children drives Joseph to take Mary and the infant Jesus from their home in Bethlehem, but they settle in Nazareth instead on hearing that Herod's son is the ruler of Judea. By contrast, in Luke the census drives Joseph to take the pregnant Mary from their home in Nazareth to Bethlehem, where the birth of Jesus occurs in some sort of stable. Then in forty days or less they return home to Nazareth by way of Jerusalem.

The only common element is that both authors seem intent on having Jesus born in Bethlehem, in order to affirm his Davidic lineage, while having him grow up and come from Nazareth when he embarks on his ministry. As we noted earlier, Davidic lineage is one of the few elements of earlier oral tradition about Jesus's origins to be seen in Paul. Davidic lineage was widely assumed as a feature of Jewish messianic expectation. Hence the two accounts of how the birth occurred in Bethlehem, combined with the respective genealogies, reflect distinct mechanisms for narrativizing the idea of Jesus's descent from David.

At the same time, the fact that Jesus was known to be a Galilean from Nazareth is central to all the Gospel narratives, especially the Passion tradition. This fact would seem incontrovertible on historical grounds. Thus, the two localities, Bethlehem and Nazareth, geographically anchor the story of Jesus's birth. Yet each author has chosen to create his "dual citizenship" by different, and even contradictory, narrative devices. Within each Gospel the continuity of the story and the

itinerary is rather seamless, as the remainder of the narrative is adjusted accordingly. In each case, the narrative supports the themes and theological motifs of that particular author. The problem arises only when one compares the two accounts both at the level of narrative and in light of known historical facts. Having done so, we may now turn to examine the main lines of the story in each birth narrative by focusing on their distinct literary designs.

L. Michael White

