

## **An Inconvenient Truth at Bethlehem**

Birth accounts of Jesus in the Gospels are quite different. Mark does not have one. John states simply that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” Of the four Gospels, Luke has the most familiar account including the census that brought Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem, shepherds abiding in the fields, and an angelic chorus singing praises to God. Matthew tells a much darker story.

Matthew’s account begins innocently enough with Wise Men from the East. These Magi were astrologers who studied meaning in the stars. What they saw led them all the way to Jerusalem, then to Bethlehem to the home of Joseph and Mary. We know very little about the Wise Men. Primarily, we know them by the gifts they brought: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Matthew’s account is rich with Old Testament symbolism and precedent. The gold and frankincense point back to the promise of the end of Isaiah’s book of prophecy (Is. 60: 6). Young camels come from eastern lands bringing gold and frankincense. One of those eastern lands is Sheba. Back in the time of King Solomon of Israel, the Queen of Sheba came to visit and brought Solomon many gifts from her country including its many spices. Foremost among the spices of Sheba was myrrh. This story of the three kings is a retelling and expanding of the Isaiah passage, a passage that proclaimed the end of exile for Israel and a triumphant return to the Jerusalem.

A familiar Christmas song quotes the kings saying, “A child, a child shivers in the cold. Let us bring him silver and gold.” Not very practical gifts for a child shivering in the cold!. It is what the kings and their impractical gifts symbolized that would mean a world of difference. This was no ordinary baby shower to which they came! Their gifts proclaimed that this was a royal birth and that the promised Messiah had come not only for the faithful of Judaism, but for the whole world. These foreigners representing other religious practices came to worship in Bethlehem. They came to Bethlehem and found the child, but they did not return to Herod in Jerusalem. They were warned in a dream and went home a different way. All was well until Herod found out.

Matthew’s story turns on Joseph’s dark dream. An angel warned him, “Get up! Take the child and his mother and flee to Egypt. Stay until further notice. Herod is on the hunt for this child, and wants to kill him.” And Joseph got up. Under cover of darkness, he took his young family to safety in Egypt. You’ve noticed that only Joseph received God’s special warning. I wonder why no one else was warned. It is an inconvenient truth at Bethlehem that only Joseph’s family got away. Only Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus, the one Herod sought, escaped.

When Herod discovered he had been duped, that the Wise men were not coming back with the information he desire, it was not a pretty sight. Herod “flew into a rage” and commanded the murder of every little boy two years old and under who lived in Bethlehem and its surrounding hills.” This is the source of the belief that it took the Wise Men two years to reach Bethlehem. The king commanded a massacre and it was done. The killing brought to memory a passage from the book of Jeremiah, originally about a

crushing defeat for the kingdom of Judah at the hands of Babylon. There was mourning and weeping personified by the mother of all Israel, Jacob's wife Rachel:

A sound was heard in Ramah, weeping and much lament.

Rachel weeping for her children, Rachel refusing all solace,

Her children gone, dead and buried.

All of Bethlehem wept at the slaughter of the innocents by King Herod. Here, too, the story of Jesus' birth is a story for our time. In the years since Bethlehem, even in our world today, the *Herods* of the world slaughter innocents.

The slaughter of the innocents by King Herod is not a story we like to associate with Christmas. It stands in marked contrast to the warmth and joy of the nativity. Yet, the story is there, right there. It is an inconvenient truth that Matthew's gospel places after the coming and going of the Wise Men. Joseph was warned in a dream to flee to Egypt and that raises a question, "Why were the other parents of Bethlehem not warned as well?"

Whose responsibility was it? Was it Joseph's responsibility? Maybe it was, but you can hardly blame him. After all, Joseph had his own young family to look out for? The same could be said for Mary with a very young child to care for. They hit the road while it was still dark so it probably did not even occur to either of them what fate might await the other residents of Bethlehem.

Who should have warned them -- God? Should God's angel have visited everyone in a dream telling them to flee? Was it God responsibility or is it just that I would have liked that ending better. Besides, that's not the way these divine warnings usually seem to work. Most of the time, it seems that one person discovers a truth or receives a message from their inner voice and tries to share it with others.

The story of the Wise Men, the flight to Egypt, and the slaughter of the innocents is largely a symbolic story. It is a reenactment of an ancient story, the story of another Joseph who brought Israel safety in Egypt to escape the ravages of famine. The Joseph in today's story brings the hopes and future of Israel, personified in Jesus, to safety in Egypt. I am still thinking, "Why didn't somebody think about the others, the innocents who would suffer at the hands of Herod?"

This is where you and I come in. We have been warned of the danger. We have seen it. We know this sort of thing is going on in our world and we cannot deny that we know it.

Let me suggest that there are some things we need to do in response to what we are seeing. First, we need to decide that we as Christians, as people of faith, cannot and will not support those in power who massacre people, who condone the slaughter of innocents. Second, we need to determine that we as citizens -- Republicans, Democrats, and Independents -- cannot and will not support those who massacre people and who condone the slaughter of innocents. Third, we need to let the powerful in our government know of our resolve, that we will not tolerate our nation being on the side of oppressors.

Let me warn you to be careful. This is where it gets dangerous. If you don't watch out, you will find yourself engaged and involved trying to make a difference, trying to change the world. You will find that quite inconvenient. And so, we face a question -- Can the light we celebrate at Christmas shine in the shadows of Bethlehem and give us a chance today to bring peace on earth? As followers of Jesus, we must find a way to acknowledge the reality of evil while holding in our lives the hope of the Christ child. This is the journey that lies before us. It will not be an easy one. Many of you know that I like to write. Many of you also are very good writers. A fellow writer shared the following regarding the challenge of finally putting pen to paper:

Usually by sheer will power I overcome the enormous resistances in myself to begin a piece of writing. After that, things fall into place. ...This has to be true of the *new* that *anyone* is called to do. If the new work is not yet present, ...extraordinary effort is required. (Elizabeth O'Connor, *Letters to Scattered Pilgrims*)

Please join me in this year now begun, resolving to commit ourselves to bringing an end to our country's support of oppression and the slaughter of innocents. Let us determine to pursue peace between nations, peace with our sisters and brothers and home, and peace in our hearts. Let this be the mission of Crossroads Church to foster peace within our families and our community, and to work for peace on earth in the name of the Prince of Peace.