

## “KEEPING THE HEROD IN CHRISTMAS”

It is always somewhat of a jolt, after all of the beauty and joy of our celebrations of Christmas, to be confronted with Matthew's account of the horrible murder of Bethlehem's children and the flight into Egypt, when the holy family is forced to become political refugees. The soft candlelight which was the backdrop for *Silent Night* several days ago has given way to the harsh light of the real world, where treachery and raw political power rule. Herod, always unstable in his throne with his uneasy alliance between the Romans and Jews, attempts to end this threat to his power once and for all. He murders all the male children in Bethlehem up to two years of age.

This story only appears in Matthew and the event is not recorded by any other historian of the period. I have to ask the question, “why not?” Did it really happen? I can't answer that question for myself. The slaughter of all the male children under two would have been a major event in the lives of people in and around Jerusalem. You would think that this account would have at least appeared in all four of the Gospels. Scripture is a complicated, multi-layered story of faith. There is an obvious alliteration to the story of the birth of Moses, where Moses is set in the river in a basket of reeds to escape the murderous rampage of Pharaoh. He had heard that there might be a threat in a new born child, so he calls for the slaughter of all the male infants under two. Matthew could be calling upon that story as a way of foreshadowing what was to come. This is where I rely on the Native American saying “it may not have happened exactly this way, but I know it is true.”

Although history does not tell us much about Herod, we feel we know him well. Herod was no fool. He had been in power long enough to be able to tell a rival when he saw one. What the simple shepherds might see as a baby, a distant relative to King David, Herod saw as a threat to everything upon which his kingdom was based. Thus Herod joins other leaders, whom we do know well from our own age, like Hitler, Pol Pot, Stalin, Mao, Milosavich, and Hussein. It is frightening how easy it is to amass a great list of such powerful political leaders. None of those men, and notice they are **all** men, would have hesitated to murder anyone who got in the way of their political aspirations. See we know Herod well. It may not have happened exactly the way Matthew described it, but we know it is true.

This text in Matthew offers us the opportunity to insert a note of realism into our Christmas celebrations, to ponder the politics behind a faithful account of the nativity, to explore the theological significance of the arrival of God in the flesh. Today's gospel may serve as an antidote to the sentimentality and sugar-coated sweetness of our Christmas. I know some of you are thinking, “I like the sugar-coated sweetness of Christmas!” The poinsettias, the candle light, the warm coziness of the stable... That is why we don't read Matthew on Christmas Eve. This morning we have the harsh light of reality. If God has come, in the flesh to us, then things are going to get bloody. There is going to be great resistance to the person and the message, and Matthew wants us to look toward the cross right from the beginning.

There is much debate about the historically certain facts about the birth of Jesus, but about his death there is no debate. Marcus Borg writes, “The most certain fact about the historical Jesus is his execution as a political rebel.” (*Jesus: A New Vision*, p. 179) Ed Sanders writes, “Jesus was executed by the Romans as a would be ‘king of the Jews.’” (*Jesus and Judaism*, p. 294) James Charlesworth writes, “Jesus was crucified by the Romans on charges that he was a political insurrectionist.” (*Jesus within Judaism*, p. 90) These scholars, who disagree among themselves on many points about Jesus' life, all agree that Jesus was crucified by the religious and political establishment as a threat to their power. The Roman overlords of Judea were not fools, nor were those who greeted the Advent of the babe in Bethlehem as the Christ. They knew that something political was happening, something to do with power, a conflicted statement about has power, and to whom power is shifting.

Judea was bubbling with revolt and revolution during the lifetime of Jesus. It is amazing how little that situation has changed in 2000 years. Bethlehem these days is still a very dangerous place. Tourists take the bus from Jerusalem, get out, and scurry to the Church of the Nativity before heading back to the big city. Nobody wants to linger in Bethlehem; that is why some local politicians put together a plan for a luxury hotel and a shopping mall in an attempt to turn the city into a place where tourists will stay and spend their money. International donations of 40 million dollars are helping with the project. Last I heard this project is being held up by political corruption as the money seemed to find its way into politicians' pockets instead of the building. So what else is new?

Poor Bethlehem---grimy, politically corrupt, caught between two warring peoples. Hardly the place for the celebration of Christmas. But Bethlehem is Christmas. Today's gospel takes place in Bethlehem. A colleague tells a story about a recent visit to Bethlehem: "I decided to spend part of my last full day at the church of the nativity. Many busloads of tourists were already there when I arrived. So were the ever present street vendors of religious souvenirs. I toured the church making videos of its exquisite mosaic floors, smelling the incense and experiencing the excitement of the nativity as I had never before... Yet the most revealing moment of my visit did not happen within the church but just outside. As I emerged a look of panic was in the eyes of the vendors. A white puff of smoke arose over some nearby buildings. Several dozen men, women and children ran from the smoke towards the church. Soon my eyes and the eyes of those around me began to water uncontrollably. My throat tightened. Tear gas! Meant to control the disturbance in the narrow street the gas carried over the church by a gentle westerly wind. I remember a young Palestinian boy asking me why I didn't use my video camera to record this."

That story paints the picture Matthew wants us to see about the word made flesh. At the end of the story of the nativity, after the angels, shepherds, wise men and the baby Jesus, we hear the screams of mothers weeping for their murdered children. Matthew rubs our noses in politics and pain, blood and sorrow before leaving Bethlehem. And even though it is not the Christmas story we want it may be the Christmas story we need. For any God who is unwilling to come to Bethlehem wouldn't do us much good. If any God is going to save us that God will have to come to where we are. Today's epistle lesson from the letter to the Hebrews says that Christ "did not come to angels" but to people living in real places on this real earth.

At Bethlehem we see a prelude of events later at a place called Calvary. The one who is accused as being King of the Jews goes head to head with the kingdoms and principalities. Herod was correct to have perceived Jesus as a threat, but he just didn't understand why. Jesus was a revolutionary, but what sort of revolutionary? Those who expected Jesus to raise a violent revolt against Rome were wrong. There was a violent attempt to overthrow Roman authority in 70 CE by the Jews that ended in a brutal defeat at Masada. As for Jesus the revolt ended at the cross. In their eyes Jesus was decisively defeated the only way empires have of dealing with threats to their power---officially sanctioned, bloody, public death.

But this is where they underestimated the movement. In this peculiar brand of politics the cross was not the end of the Jesus revolt, but the beginning. A great cosmic struggle the first skirmish of which was fought in Bethlehem. To the world's matter of fact use of violence came a very different reaction. At the end of the gospel, one of the last acts Jesus performs is one of the greatest surprises in the entire passion narrative. When the Roman guards come to arrest Jesus, Peter in the conventional use of violence as a last resort, raises his sword and cuts off the ear of the guard. Jesus tells him to put his sword away and he restores the guard's ear as his last healing miracle. That is really an amazing way for Jesus to end his public ministry. Jesus refused to give in to the violence that marked his life from beginning to end. It would have to work a different way.

The movement Jesus started continues today anytime one of us, who make the wild claim to be disciples, do something surprising to confront the world as it is so that we participate in a glimpse of the world as it might someday be. I had never thought of Mary and Joseph as refugees fleeing their homeland, but that is really the case. It reminded me of the day when a group of us from one of my former churches gathered at the airport to greet a family who had fled their homeland escaping likely death. The Krasniqi's, just children really, fled over the mountains to escape Serbian soldiers, who under Slobodan Milosevic, had wreaked havoc for ethnic

Albanians. These five young people, Muslims, started life over again in the US thanks to the help of Christians in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Pundits have said that politics will never be the same after 9/11. I don't know about you but things don't look any different to me. We are still relying on guns and bombs to bring peace. Maybe next year will be different.