

A Light in the Darkness

Matthew 2: 13-18

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There's frequently a note of sadness, a melancholy mood that descends upon us after the celebration of Christmas. All of the presents have been opened and put away. The Christmas tree is looking a little droopy and friends and family have departed and headed back home. The same is true with regards to the biblical account of Christ's birth in the Gospel of Matthew. The arrival of the Wise Men and the bestowal of gifts to the Christ child is exciting. Nevertheless, there's the ominous warning of death and despair right around the corner. The Wise Men, fearful of Herod's true intentions, return home by another route, so that they do not have to return to Jerusalem. Then Joseph has another one of those angelic dreams in which he is warned to get out of town as soon as possible. From a biblical point of view, the Christmas season ends with Mary and Joseph and their son fleeing in the night towards the safety of Egypt. Meanwhile, Herod seeks to kill the Christ child while murdering all of the children under the age of two in the town of Bethlehem. This is not a very pretty ending to the story of Christ's birth. Nevertheless, on this first Sunday after Christmas it needs to be told.

It begins with a villain named Herod. That's the only way to describe him. Herod was the ruler or as he liked to think of himself, the king of Judea. However, he sat upon his throne uneasily, always fearful that someone was plotting to take it away from him. The Jewish people, over whom he ruled with absolute authority, loathed him. In their eyes, he was a brutal tyrant who only pretended to be Jewish. The Romans didn't like him either. They considered him to be a petty potentate in their empire, whose power and authority could be snatched away in a moment. As long as he continued to fill the coffers of Rome with tax revenue, they would put up with him, but that was about it. Herod even had doubts about the loyalty of his own family. Now up in years, he was fearful that they were plotting against him. He became so paranoid that he murdered his wife and three of his sons. Referring to Herod's murderous behavior as well as his pretended Jewish heritage, which forbade the consumption of pork, the emperor of Rome, Caesar Augustus, on one occasion made this observation, "It's better to be Herod's pig than to be his son."

Herod was a villain. He would do anything to hold on to his power and authority. The same is true today. Our world is filled with a whole host of villains just like Herod. They reside in places like China, North Korea, Iran, Russia and a whole host of other countries. In fact, just recently one of them was ousted from the nation of Syria. They are every bit as mean and vicious as Herod and they will strike out at anyone whom they consider to be a threat. There are also some other Herods a little closer to home and I suspect we have met a few of them down through the years. These are individuals who want to control and manipulate the lives of others for their own personal gain. They will do or say anything to get the upper hand. Their conscience has been deadened with regard to the pain they are willing to inflict on others. Speaking about what life will be like in the last days, Paul

describes these kind of people in his second letter to Timothy. He says, "People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God—having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them" (2 Timothy 3:2-5). Sound familiar? It's a pretty good description of the increasing number of people whom we encounter in our world today.

Paul says to stay away from them. But that is not always so easy. When the Herods of this world feel threatened and vindictive, there will always be victims. That was certainly true of the children in Bethlehem who were killed by Herod's soldiers, and it was certainly true of the parents who grieved their loss. In describing this tragic scene, Matthew quotes the prophet Jeremiah, which describes Rachel, the wife of the patriarch Jacob, "weeping for her children which are no more" (Jeremiah 31:15). Like a distraught mother, she arises symbolically from her centuries old grave to mourn the loss of those children who should not have died. I am also sure that she would rise up to mourn the loss of those, both Jews and Gentiles, who are the victims of the Herods of this world in the twentieth and now the twenty-first centuries. There is a vast multitude of victims, millions upon millions. Even in the ongoing violence in Ukraine created by Putin's invasion of that country, over one million soldiers and civilians have been killed.

Unfortunately, it doesn't stop there. Closer to home it is even evidenced in our human relationships with one another. Years ago my wife, Sherry, shared this heart-breaking story with me. She was employed as a social worker in a hospital. Contacting a daughter who lived in another state about her elderly mom who would need someone to make arrangements for her discharge from the hospital, the woman replied over the phone, "She's been living in Virginia for a long, long time. Let the state take care of her." The daughter then hung up, end of conversation and end of any concern for the mother who had birthed her. Sadly, it doesn't even end there. There are a whole host of victims all around us, like the countless number of children waiting to be placed in good foster homes where they will receive loving care and attention. And how about the fact that the birth rate in America is declining because we no longer want to welcome those whom we have conceived. They too are victims and they too number in the millions. We live in a throw away culture, discarding those whom we consider to be a burden or threat to the way we want to live.

Yes, Matthew's concluding description of the birth of Christ is not a very pretty picture. It includes a hideous villain and a lot of innocent victims. Furthermore, it seems to fail to provide us with a victor who can save the victims and banish the villain. Mary and Joseph and their son flee for their lives to Egypt to escape the violence that awaits them in Bethlehem. Remember those western movies at the Saturday afternoon matinees? Just when the bad guys were about to gain the upper hand and do away with the innocent victims, a hero would ride onto the scene and win the day. Or in the case of the TV show Superman, we watched a champion of "truth, justice and the American way." That's not immediately

apparent, however, in the passage of Scripture we read this morning. There doesn't seem to be a hero waiting in the wings to come to the rescue.

Neither was it apparent in the Christmas play that I wrote a number of years ago. This is what I envisioned. A father and mother and their two children are visiting their grandparents. It's Christmas Eve and the children ask granddaddy to tell the Christmas story, all of it from beginning to end. So he begins with the angel's visit to Zechariah and continues all the way through the Scriptural accounts in Matthew and Luke. As he describes what took place, each event comes alive on the stage, portrayed by a cast of costumed actors. Everything was coming along quite nicely as I wrote this play until I reached the ending. How was I going to end it? Did I want to end it with Mary and Joseph taking baby Jesus and fleeing into Egypt? That would never do! The play needed to end on a positive note, not one of despair and gloom. I wrestled with this dilemma for a number of days until I remembered the calligraphy art that I showed you this morning. I had seen it in the artist's studio month's earlier. Remembering the passage of Scripture upon which it was based, I realized that God had supplied me with the proper ending for my play about the birth of Christ. I now knew that it should end in this way. Grandfather and the entire family would be looking out of the large picture window of their home. As they peer into the darkness, they catch a glimpse of the Holy Family leaving Bethlehem, Joseph holding a lantern to show the way. As this scene unfolds the grandfather says to his grandchildren, "When I see all of the wickedness and evil in our world today, I become discouraged and even fearful of what the future holds in store for you. But then I am reminded of the story of Christ's birth and these words from the Gospel of John, "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:5).

That was the only appropriate ending to my Christmas play that I wrote years ago and it is the only appropriate ending to the passage of Scripture that we read earlier this morning. There was a victor, a hero, a superman that God sent to rescue the victims of all the villains that have ever lived, both those in the past and those who are living today. His name is Jesus and His name means "Savior." He came to save us not only from our own sins and shortcomings, but also from all of the evil that others, like Herod, can perpetrate upon us. In the form of a baby born in Bethlehem, He came to deliver us from their grasp. He is our Victor who came to save us. He is the everlasting Light of the world, a light that not even the darkest night can extinguish.