

A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of  
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts  
*Preached by the Rev. Jacqueline Clark on January 5, 2020 (Christmas 2, Year A)*

When I think of the Christmas story, I think of the version we tell in our pageants, the one we see on Christmas cards and in nativity scenes. It's Luke's version of the story, with the registration, the journey to Bethlehem, the angel appearing to the shepherds—and then, a little addition from the Gospel of Matthew—the magi, stripped of their context, tacked on to the end.

It's no wonder. The story Luke tells is a story we do not hesitate to tell our children. It fits beautifully with our favorite carols. There's some tough stuff there—the oppressive empire, a forced journey on the cusp of labor, a birth in a stable far from home. But particularly because it's become so familiar, you have to pay very close attention to see that.

But Matthew's story—it's a tragedy, a horror story. It begins innocently enough. Jesus is born, like every other baby at that time and place, at home, which in this version, is Bethlehem. The birth itself is unremarkable, rating only a clause, not even a whole sentence. But then, the star appears. It draws the magi, the astrologers, from Persia. They travel for months, possibly even years, in the belief that this star heralds the birth of a new king for the Jews. It is remarkable, and beautiful, when you consider that the magi, who practice a different religion, and who bow before another king, are compelled to this long, hard, and expensive journey.

But here is where it gets tragic. These magi have nothing but the best and purest of intentions. But they are also naïve. They stop in the capital, and begin asking around—does anyone know where they might find this new king? But there is already a king in Jerusalem, King Herod. He is in some ways very successful. As one scholar puts it, he “made sure his kingdom would be significant, prosperous, and protected within the emerging Roman Empire...Many of his contemporaries saw him as a savior in his own right.”<sup>1</sup> But he was also brutal, ordering the execution of even members of his own family, including his wife.

The magi have the best and purest of intentions. But they set into motion a terrible chain of events. Herod gets wind of this new king they are asking about. And he is frightened. There can only be one king. And because Herod is frightened, all of Israel is frightened too. They know exactly what Herod is capable of.

So Herod summons the magi. He asks them to report back when they find the child, under the very flimsy pretense that he, the sitting King, would like to pay homage to the newborn King. God warns the magi to find another way home, one that doesn't run through Jerusalem.

But the danger has not passed. In fact, it has only increased. God sends an angel to deliver another message in a dream. Joseph must take Mary and Jesus and flee to Egypt. In the deep of night, Joseph wakes Mary, and while their child sleeps, they pack what they can carry for a trip to a strange land. Mary lifts her baby, careful not to wake him, and holds him to her chest. They walk out the door of the home they do not yet know they will never see again. They walk past the homes of family and friends they cannot warn without risk to everyone involved. They walk for days and days, their feet blistered from the road and their backs aching from their packs. They walk until they reach Egypt, where they must build a temporary life among strangers whose language, laws, and customs they do not know.

But back in Jerusalem, Herod realizes that the magi aren't coming back. He is irate, and determined to get rid of this so-called new king, no matter what the cost. In the verses that are

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<sup>1</sup> Skinner, Matt. “Herod, Too, Is the Reason for the Season.” *Working Preacher*.  
<http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5402>. Accessed 4 January 2019.

cut from the middle of today's Gospel reading, he orders the death of all children in and around Bethlehem who are age 2 or under.

There's a saying that everything in the bible is true, and some of it actually happened. This is one of those things that probably didn't happen. The historical record does not contain any evidence of what our tradition calls the slaughter of the innocents.

But the reason I think we need Matthew's version of Christmas, this awful story, is that it is also true. Innocents suffer and die. Our tradition tells us that this was not the first time. Back in Exodus, Pharaoh, another fearful, angry leader, ordered the death of all babies born to Hebrew women. And history and the news tells us that this was not the last. Then genocide of the Jews, of the Rohingya, of native people on the US. Children separated from their parents and caged or warehoused at our border. Communities of color pumped poisoned water, breathing poisoned air. Innocents suffer and die.

During communion today, we'll be singing the Coventry Carol. It was written in Coventry, England as part of The Pageant of the Shearmen and Tailors, one in a series of bible-based plays that the city's guild would perform, dating back to at least 1534. This particular play told the story of the nativity mostly following to Matthew. Just after the angel warns Joseph to flee to Egypt, three women of Bethlehem take the stage with their children. These women know what is coming. As they rock their babies to sleep, they sing this carol as a final lullaby: Lully, lullay, thou little tiny child, bye bye, lully, lullay, thou little tiny child, bye bye, lully lullay.

The song was never intended to be a Christmas Carol. But because of its connection with the Matthew's nativity, it began to be sung at Christmas. It was sung every year at Coventry Cathedral. Then came WWII. As an industrial center, Coventry produced things like munitions and airplanes, which made it a target for bombing by the Germans. After months of smaller raids, on November 14, 1940, 515 German bombers attacked Coventry. Much of the city was destroyed, including 4300 homes. An estimated 568 people were killed.

That year, at the end of a BBC Christmas broadcast from Coventry, the Cathedral Choir gathered in the Cathedral's ruins and once more sang the carol. In the midst of the ruins, the mothers and fathers of Coventry sang the hymn of the mothers of Bethlehem.

This haunting carol has endured. We need it, just as we need Matthew's story. The incarnation is an indescribably beautiful, joyful thing. But it doesn't come from nowhere. The incarnation is born of God's agony as God beholds the state of creation. It is born from Mary's heartbreak at the oppression of her people, which makes her willing to pay the enormous cost of bearing Jesus. And Jesus' own ministry, the salvation and redemption and liberation he offers, it is formed in these early experiences. Of feeling his mother's heart pound with fear and anxiety. Of fleeing the place he called home, and living in a strange land. Of the loss of his cousins and neighbors. Of being the one who survived. These are the things that shaped Jesus' heart. And that shaped how he saw the world, what he noticed and who he noticed, and how he chose to move and act and be. God's grief, Mary's heartbreak, Jesus' sorrow, became the birthplace of hope.

Which is why we listen to this hard Gospel, why we sing this carol. Why we take the time, in the midst of this season of Christmas, to join our voices to the mothers and fathers of Bethlehem and Coventry, of Jews, Rohingya, and Native people, refugees and immigrants and people of color, of all the innocents who suffer and die. We sing to let our hearts be shaped like God's heart, which is to say, we let them be broken. We grieve. And what shapes our hearts shapes our lives, how we choose to see and move and act and be. Our grief becomes the birthplace of hope.