

Blood in Bethlehem
Matthew 2:13-23
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“When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem....”

A few years ago, it was my great privilege to visit Bethlehem. I was on a grant with about 20 other clergy. To get to Bethlehem means crossing into what’s called the “West Bank.” The Israelis have built a wall, complete with guard-towers, machine guns, spotlights, cameras, mine fields, and soldiers everywhere. We were given strict instructions on how to behave when crossing over to Bethlehem. Soldiers would board our bus, check our passports, question us, and maybe even harass us to see how we might react. Our job was to sit and otherwise be quiet.

I remember thinking about how odd to get to Bethlehem, the birthplace of the Prince of Peace, and we have to be questioned by armed troops with machine guns trained on us. It seemed to me to be the opposite of Christmas.

But these days I realize that Bethlehem *is* Christmas. This armed Bethlehem. The Bethlehem of today is the Bethlehem of Matthew with soldiers and suspicion and fear. For Matthew, this is part of the Christmas story. Right here in Bethlehem Matthew tells us this horrible story of King Herod’s massacre of the boy babies.

King Herod the Great is threatened by talk of a new King in Bethlehem. So

he massacred all the boy babies in and around Bethlehem. This story reminds us how much violence is part of this much beloved Christmas story and that the Incarnate Son of God was born right into the middle of it.

How this story contrasts with our cherished views of Christmas! “O Little Town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie” is a lie. “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” made miserable by the death of all boys two years and under, streets running red with blood while mothers wail, lament their lost children, that’s the way the Bible does Bethlehem.

“Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me,” we sing. Christmas cards are sentimental, and TV tells of a snow-covered wonderland where Christmas evokes the best in everybody.

Well, the first Christmas evoked bloodshed in King Herod. Matthew’s Christmas pageant ends, not with tinsel covered angels proclaiming good will, but with Rachel weeping for her slaughtered children. Christmas in Bethlehem, the real Bethlehem.

Herod was no fool. He had been in power long enough to be able to tell a rival when he saw one. What the shepherds might see as a baby, a distant relative of David, Herod knew as a threat to everything upon which his kingdom, his way of life, was based. Herod is like all others who seek control and power and will murder, torture, lynch, execute, or make disappear anyone that might threaten their hold on power. The world calls it the Syria, where the East and the West kill through intermediaries in order to control the Eastern Mediterranean; or the world says this is just the way it is here in the United States where we look the other way

at Saudi Arabian murder because we want cheap oil. The world calls it Ferguson or Baltimore, or Birmingham, or Beirut, or Belfast or the Border Wall. The Bible calls it Bethlehem.

We don't like *this* Christmas story. We prefer to hear of the shepherds, and the angels and the little baby Jesus. Christmas for us has become the escapist fantasy that for one day of the year everybody becomes a miraculously transformed Scrooge who suddenly does right by Tiny Tim. It's hard to be honest about ourselves and our situation in the Bahamas or Mar-a-Lago. But the Bible tells the truth in Bethlehem.

If we will remove our ear buds, and quit looking at our screens for just a moment we might hear the mothers screaming, weeping for their lost babies wherever the Slaughter of the Innocents is reenacted. Let us go even unto Bethlehem and see this thing.

Call it Chicago, Mercy Hospital on Nov. 19. Call it Thousand Oaks, where students were gathered at a bar on Nov. 7. Call it Pittsburgh at the Tree of Life Synagogue, on Oct. 27. Call it Santa Fe, TX at the high school or call it Nashville at the Waffle House. Call it Stoneman Douglas High School, or Benton, KY – that's just a few this year. Or call it the Pulse Nightclub or Sandy Hook Elementary School or Virginia Tech or Las Vegas or Mother Emmanuel or Sutherland Springs, or Jasper or Sixteenth Street Baptist Church or call it the ASD Lounge on Old Tyler Road... Call it whatever you want. Matthew calls it Bethlehem.

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 babies, our

nose gets rubbed in politics, power and pain, violence, blood and sorrow before leaving Bethlehem.

And even though it's not the Christmas story we want, it may be the Christmas story we need. For any God who is unwilling to come to Bethlehem, won't do us much good. If any God is going to save us, *us*, God will have to come to where we are, because we can't get to God.

Every Christmas we are able to hear these extraordinary phrases from the opening of John's glorious gospel: *The Word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth....*

Christians call that the Incarnation, the faith that God Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth came here, took on our flesh, forgave us, redeemed us, saved us that we might be brought to God.

Well, tonight is Matthew's way of telling that same story. John calls it "The Word made flesh;" Matthew calls it "Bethlehem."

"Love came down at Christmas," we sometimes sing.

If love, God's love, is to come down to us, there is going to be some pain in it, yes, and blood too. We live in a country where people hold onto tight to our gods, and many powerful people will kill for our "southern way of life," or to "make America great again." We will not let go of our devoted allegiances, our cherished notions, and our idols without their being pulled from us. In response we pull our guns. We don't give up our false and sin-filled ways without a fight.

Without killing.

At Bethlehem we see a prelude to events later at a place called Calvary. The one called the Prince of Peace goes head-to-head with the violent power of kings and control, and there is pain, and violence, weeping and blood. All for us and our salvation. All to set us free from the way of violence so we might live the way of justice and peace. All so we can become the people of the Incarnate Prince of Peace in this hateful, violent world.

Years ago, a friend of mine was working in a homeless shelter about this time of the year. The basement of the church where they were feeding people was all decorated for Christmas. Hanging among the tinsel and glitter were the words “Peace on Earth” and “Good News.” During the meal one of the homeless men asked out loud for everyone to hear, “What is the good news anyway?” There was a long pause. What do you say to a bunch of homeless people on a cold winter’s night? Finally, another homeless man spoke up, “The good news is that it doesn’t have to be like this.”

Hear me on this. You know and I know that there is a lot more to the Good News than this. But it is true, the Gospel says that violence and bigotry and fear does not have to be like this. The Way of Christ is of grace and love, peace, and mercy.

And it all begins at Bethlehem.

Amen and amen.