

CHRISTMAS AND THE KILLING OF THE INNOCENTS

Last Sunday we awoke to the news that there had been a mass killing in Australia. The occasion was a celebration of Hanukkah by a large group of Jewish people on a beach in Sydney. A Muslim father and son are blamed for the killing of 15 people and the wounding of 42 others. Australia has been the scene of a sharp uptake in violence directed toward Jews in that country in recent years.

But of course Australia is not alone in being the site of antisemitism. The Anti-Defamation League reports an increase of 893% in antisemitic incidents in the last decade in our country. Much of this antisemitism seems to have a tie with the Gaza attacks of October of 2023. On October 7, 2023, 1,219 Jews were slaughtered and 251 were taken captive. The perpetrators were mostly affiliated with the Hamas terror group.

What is the cause of all of this trouble? It is somewhat fascinating to listen to the commentators who try to explain this. Many trace the problem to the Palestinian issue and the failure of Israel to provide the Palestinians with their own state. But then we have to go back a few decades and remember that there was this thing called the Holocaust which involved the murder of six million Jews. That slaughter was perpetrated in Germany which had the highest education levels in the world at that time. Then before that there were the pogroms in Russia and eastern Europe. And we can find antisemitism that goes back in history before that.

The roots of this difficulty go back into Biblical history. They go back to the Garden of Eden. The source of the conflict is the age-old battle between God and Satan. After Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden, the Lord pronounced this judgment against the devil (PROJECTOR ON--- GENESIS 3:15), recorded in Genesis 3:15: “**I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring;**

he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.” The Evil One is always going to be opposing us human beings, and God’s Chosen people, and the promised Messiah.

Generations later God chose Abraham to be the object of His special blessing. In Genesis #12 He promised Abraham that He would make of this man a great nation and that through these descendants all of the world would be blessed. The devil always opposes God’s promises. So thus began his opposition to Abraham’s descendants, the Jewish people.

In his old age Abraham had the promised special son, Isaac. But earlier he had a son by the servant of Sarah who was Ishmael. He was not the promised son. (GENESIS

16:12) God said this about Ishmael in Genesis #16 v. 12: **“He shall be a wild donkey of a man,**

his hand against everyone

and everyone's hand against him,

and he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen.” The Arab people trace their physical and spiritual lineage to this Ishmael. Thus we have this age-old conflict between the Jews and the Arabs, the Jews and the Muslims.

The twelve sons of Isaac, who became leaders of the twelve tribes of Israel, years later were in danger of being absorbed by the surrounding Canaanites. So the Lord had them transplanted to Egypt. Several centuries later they had grown into a large nation. The Egyptian pharaoh saw them as a threat. So he tried to do them in. (EXODUS 1:16) In Exodus #1 v. 16 we read this order which he gave: **“When you serve as midwife to the Hebrew women and see them on the birthstool, if it is a son, you shall kill him, but if it is a daughter, she shall live.”**

The Jews were in danger of being wiped out, but God raised up Moses to deliver them out of Egypt. That is the story of Passover and the exodus. The Hebrews ended up back in the land promised to Abraham. More centuries later God provided them with a king. In 1 Samuel #16 God chose David, this teenage boy, to become king of Israel. (2 SAMUEL 7:12) In 2 Samuel #7 vv. 12 & 13, when David was king, the Lord said to him, **“When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. (2 SAMUEL 7:13) He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.”** So we have a promise of a special descendant who will rule over an eternal kingdom.

In the following centuries the existence of this kingdom and its people were threatened. They were overrun by the Babylonians and then the Persians and then the Greeks and then the Romans. Yet a remnant was able to maintain its identity as Jews.

The prophets during these difficult years promised that a Messiah was coming. He was to be the king who would rule over an eternal kingdom. One of these prophets even identified the place of His birth. (MICAH 5:2) In Micah #5 v. 2 we are told, **“But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah,**

**who are too little to be among the clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to be ruler in Israel,
whose coming forth is from of old,**

from ancient days.” Those of us who are planning to go to Israel in March will be staying at an inn in Bethlehem. It happens to be owned by the cousin of the current mayor of Bethlehem and a friend of my seminary classmate who is pastor of Jerusalem Baptist Church. Some of his congregation will be presenting a musical program in Manger Square on Christmas Eve. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Thus it is that we come to the Christmas story. The second chapter of Matthew's Gospel describes the appearance of the magi, or wise men, in Bethlehem. Usually this incident is included in the Christmas story, though it is clear that these guys showed up in Bethlehem months, or probably more than a year, after the birth of the Christ child.

We don't know how many of the wise men there were, though the familiar Christmas carol claims that there were three. We don't know exactly who they were, or how they knew about the birth of a Jewish king. But it did have something to do with a sign that they saw in the sky. So they traveled from the east and showed up in Jerusalem asking where this king was born.

We were reminded by our Scripture reading this morning that they asked King Herod about the place of the birth of this Jewish King. This was news to Herod. He asked the priests what the Scriptures had to say about the birth of some Jewish king. They referred to the prophecy in Micah #5 v. 2. Herod sent them to Bethlehem and asked them to give him a report so that he could worship this king. His real desire was to kill this pretender to the throne. The wise men found the baby Jesus. They worshipped Him and left their gifts. An angel warned them in a dream to go home by another way.

If the story ended here, we would be left with mostly pleasant images of the first Christmas. We would have in our mind the picture of the angel appearing to Mary and then to Joseph, announcing the virgin birth of the prophesied Messiah. We would have the scene where angels appear to shepherds watching their sheep at night and announce that the Messiah has been born for them in nearby Bethlehem. Then we would have the scene in the manger where the shepherds show up to see the baby Jesus.

We would have the scene some months later when these Eastern officials show up to see the baby Jesus and present to Him and His parents valuable gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh.

But this is not the whole story. In the following verses in Matthew #2 we read, **"Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, 'Arise and take the Child and His mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is going to search for the Child to destroy Him.' And he arose and took the Child and His mother by night, and departed for Egypt; and was there until the death of Herod; that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet might be fulfilled, saying, 'Out of Egypt did I call my Son.'**

"Then when Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, he became very enraged, and sent and slew all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its environs, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had ascertained from the magi. Then that which was spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled, saying, 'A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and great

mourning, Rachel weeping for her children; and she refused to be comforted, because they were no more.”

So what are we to make of this murder of the innocents? It is a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. Matthew quotes from the prophet Jeremiah to show that, but it ruins the pleasant images that we might have of the coming of Jesus into the world.

It seems to me that there are at least two lessons to be found here. (PROJECTOR ON-- THERE IS A SPIRITUAL WAR...) The first is that THERE IS A SPIRITUAL WAR GOING ON IN OUR WORLD AND THE DEVIL IS ALWAYS OUT TO DESTROY GOD'S PEOPLE. The descendants of Abraham are given special promises by God. Those promises were originally quoted at the beginning of Genesis #12. But later in Deuteronomy #7 v. 6 the Bible (DEUTERONOMY 7:6) says, **“For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.”** Thus the devil, who is always at work to oppose God's purposes and God's people, is always out to get the Jews.

We have also seen that God has made promises concerning the coming of a Jewish Messiah. Thus the Evil One was out to destroy the baby Jesus. He used evil King Herod in an effort to destroy Him.

Then we also need to be aware that those of us who choose to follow Jesus have a special place in God's plan and are also the objects of attack by Satan. (1 PETER 2:9) In Peter #2 v. 9 the apostle tells Christians, **“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”**

So it was, and still is, a world beset by sin and evil into which Jesus entered. The Son of God was Himself an “innocent.” For the claim of the Bible was that He was sinless. For He was God who became a human being by means of a virgin birth. (PROJECTOR OFF) Yet He faced opposition and difficulty and evil. He faced opposition especially from religious leaders. Some of His countrymen supported Him and followed Him. Often it was Gentiles whom He found to be most interested in His message. In the end He was crucified at the instigation of Jewish religious leaders.

But it was not a death without purpose. For the New Testament explains that it was a death that paid the penalty for the sins of the world. That death and resurrection provided a basis by which the world can be transformed. That transformation begins with us when and if we embrace Him as our Savior and receive the gift of forgiveness of sins and eternal life simply by putting our trust in Him.

That world that Jesus entered is beset by sin and death--- even for little ones--- and needs transformation. The second lesson that I find here is that THE ENTRANCE OF GOD'S SON INTO THE WORLD THREATENS US WITH LOSS OF CONTROL, BUT

WE NEED TO TRUST HIM. (Repeat) (PROJECTOR ON--- THE ENTRANCE OF GOD'S SON INTO...)

Judea was part of the Roman Empire. Herod had served under the authority of the Romans as ruler of Judea for almost forty years. He wanted to keep control of this Jewish province within his family. So when these government officials from someplace to the east showed up and wanted to know where the King of the Jews had just been born, that was upsetting to him. He was the king, and he was going to determine who was king after him. Threats to that authority had to be eliminated. He had to stay in control.

If the claim of the Christian gospel is true, if Jesus was really God who became a human being who died on a cross to pay the penalty for our sins so that by faith in Him we can go to heaven some day, then he has a certain claim on our lives. We have an obligation to give up control of the agenda of our lives to Him.

But that is difficult. We like to be in control of our own lives. By nature we want to be in charge. Yielding control to this Jesus might mean making changes in our lives, in our way of being, in our priorities, in our goals in life, in how we spend our money, in what we do with our time, in how we live our lives.

Such it is that much of the world around us would prefer Christmas to be about Santa and reindeer and snowmen and chestnuts roasting over an open fire. But at its foundation Christmas is about God who entered the world to deal with sin and to transform the world and provide us with a way to heaven. We can find that way if we will trust Him as our Savior.

There is another bad guy in the story about Jesus. The Bible does not give us much information about him. We are not even told what his name was. But from the information that we do have about him we can make reasonable deductions about his basic motivation and world view. He was a Jewish guy who resented the control that the Romans had over his Jewish people. He was also committed to the Torah, to Jewish law. His conviction was that no one except a Jewish king should rule over God's Chosen People. Perhaps there were incidents in his life where he experienced personal mistreatment at the hands of the Romans.

At any rate at some point he was prompted to join with a group of radicals. They were referred to in the time of Jesus as Zealots. At some point he became involved in an incident that involved an attack upon the Romans. Perhaps he attacked a Roman soldier. Perhaps he was involved in a plot that was revealed to the Romans. In any event he was captured by the Roman authorities and sentenced to death. So one day he found himself hanging on a cross next to Jesus. He had lost all control over his life. His plans of rebellion and overthrow of the Romans were seemingly dashed. Yet in observing the words and behavior of Jesus, he found something attractive about Him. He had a glimmer of hope that perhaps Jesus was the promised Messiah. In his

desperation he cried out to Jesus and asked him to remember him when he came in His kingdom. Jesus responded that this day he would be with Him in Paradise.

Such is the offer which He makes to each one of us. It is often at that point that we recognize that our control over our lives is limited that we are open to the claim of Jesus. We have nothing that we can bring to the table to earn His acceptance. Like that criminal hanging on the cross, we can only cry out to Him in faith. And that is enough. It is that faith which provides with our ticket to heaven, our forgiveness of our sins.

(REVELATION 3:20) In Revelation #3 v. 20 Jesus says, **“Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.”**