

A Post-Christmas Meditation

Matthew 2:13-18

Christmas, and especially the weeks right after Christmas, can be such a pressure-filled time of year.

When I was in seminary I lived with a couple of guys who were training to be counselors and therapists. They told me that the month after Christmas was a time when they saw more new clients than in any month of the year.

That didn't surprise me all that much. I knew that I always felt a big letdown after Christmas—that I was familiar with the idea of the Christmas blues.

After the joy and celebration and gift giving and receiving and parties and food and more parties and food. After all that, it's hard to adjust back to normal life. It's hard to get back into our routines.

It could be a lot worse. We've been focusing on Luke's account of the birth of Jesus this year—Matthew's has a different tone to it. After Jesus was born, when the Magi came to honor him, King Herod got in the mix and tried to track down this new Messiah. There's some great intrigue here: Herod tries to use the Magi to identify this new king, but they figure it out and return to their homes by sneaking out of town by a back-road.

Our text today describes what happened just after the great events of the Christmas story. It follows almost immediately after the stable and the shepherds and the angels and the gold and frankincense and myrrh. The angel in our text today pops in to tell Joseph and Mary that their child's life is in danger—that they need to go on the run.

Without minimizing any of our post-holiday blues, it could have been a lot worse.

When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him." So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called

my son."

When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:

*"A voice is heard in Ramah,
weeping and great mourning,
Rachel weeping for her children
and refusing to be comforted,
because they are no more."*

Herod is really one of the worst villains in the Bible. There's virtually nothing redeeming about him. He sits on the throne because the Romans are using him to keep his own people under control. We'll see later that his own family is a mess. And in our story today he seems to be doing everything he can to kill the Christmas spirit—to stamp out the joy of the birth of the Messiah. This episode has been called the 'slaughter of the innocents' throughout Christian history. I have a little boy. I can't even bear to think about this story.

There are a lot of things that try to kill the Christmas spirit in us, right?

We've been watching the news about new terror threats, about political arguments that seem not to have any hope of resolution. A friend of mine saw a fight in a shop on Oxford Street the day after Christmas and decided that he finally understood what Boxing Day meant.

There are so many things that try to kill the Christmas spirit in us. One way to defend the meaning of Christmas from outside pressure is to remember the point of it all. The birth of the Messiah is God's breaking into human history to demonstrate his love for his creation.

We started Advent this year with a look at John 3:16—'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him will not perish, but will have eternal life.'

We keep the joy of Christmas alive when we remember that one single verse. God loves us

so much that no price was too high to pay to prove it to us.

This horrible text that we read this morning—that awful story of the slaughter of the innocents becomes an attempt to slaughter our innocence. It reminds us that even the Christ child needed to be protected when he was vulnerable—his family had to take him all the way to Egypt to keep him safe.

It reminds us also that we're vulnerable, too. That our faith and joy and hope have to be protected sometimes—that outside things can attack them sometimes.

When that happens—when the post Christmas blues feel like they're going to take over—when our faith and joy and hope seem like they're slipping away—when that happens we ask ourselves:

'Where is all this Good News we've been promised?'

The answer to that question is that it's right there where we left it.

In a stable, lying in a manger, receiving gifts he can't use from people he'll never see again. Tiny and vulnerable, and reminding us that we are, too.

The good news doesn't change, even when our mood does. The good news that God loved us so much that he sent his son to offer us forgiveness and restoration and eternal life. That Good News hasn't gone anywhere.

The Good News is still in the words of the angel, the one that told the shepherds not to be afraid.

'Do not be afraid,' he said.

'I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people.'

'Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you—he is Christ the Lord. This will be the sign to you: You will find him as a baby, wrapped up in cloth and lying in a manger.'

That good news hasn't gone anywhere. Thank God.

Amen.

