

God's Revolution:

A Radical Reading of Scripture for Refugees from False Religion

Fourth Sunday in Advent - December 22, 2019

Matthew 2:13-18

Slaughtering Children: Business as Usual in the Palace

And when the wise men had left, Look! A heavenly messenger came to Joseph and cried, "Wake up! Take the baby and mother and flee to sanctuary and live there until I bring word, for Herod will seek to destroy the baby." ... Then Herod set out in his wrath to exterminate all the helpless innocents in Bethlehem and its region who were two years old and younger, relying on the knowledge of the wise men ... And from every hilltop came the call to mourn and weep inconsolably, for the mothers of the dead cannot be comforted.

Their tiny, butchered remains lie under your feet. They were happy and innocent children who were slaughtered and thrown into secret graves. Try to picture it. Try to feel their suffering. Can you? Will you dare? For those children all died by official order of Church and State. And so, you're not supposed to think of them or ask why they were murdered. You're not to know or care, or imagine how it happened, let alone cry out in horror and outrage. Your heart is to remain distant and numb, just as the victims are to remain invisible and forgotten. Because the killers of those children are still in charge. And if you mention the fate of those babies and ask who is to blame, the killers will strike you down.

So do the smart thing. Stay quiet, think of nice, positive things, pay your taxes that allow the crimes, and don't imagine those mass graves or hear the terrible screams of babies being chopped to death. Sacrifice your soul as their little bodies were sacrificed, in the service of the Emperor.

Or instead, you can do what your soul and those victims require: You can risk everything in your life for the sake of the lost children – and for all the other ones who will die today and tomorrow at the hands of the same killers robed in stately office.

This is the situation in Canada, or America, or anywhere in what we call the civilized world, in the year 2019. The same was true in Judea in the year 4 BC. The Crime and the Choice continue.

In a way, that's all there is to say. What matters is what we do. All the words spoken over the years about child sacrificial killings and baby trafficking and church and state genocide have not stopped the killer's knife. The crime continues unabated. And the only way it will ever stop is when we place our own bodies between the innocents and the killers who are coming for them.

This sermon, like my life, is dedicated to that purpose.

It's obscenely ironic that the Christian churches that have spilled the blood of so many children will be presenting this Gospel reading on the upcoming fourth Sunday in Advent, December 22. Considering the enormous anger and denial Canadian church goers have displayed whenever we've tried speaking to them about their own genocidal acts, you can bet that very few people in the Catholic or Anglican or United Church pews this Sunday will draw a connection between Herod's slaughter of the Bethlehem babies and their own murder of 60,000 aboriginal children. The Christians' once-a-week Happy Hour in church is not designed to place themselves in the Bible story, or make it apply to their own lives.

Nevertheless, the blood of the innocents still cries out through every locked cathedral door and closed heart. As the Gospel passage today concludes, "The mothers of the dead cannot be comforted". They cannot be comforted by all the official apologies by the Church and State killers or the reconciliation babble or the blood money payoffs or the fake government inquiries. Because there is no moral statute of limitation on murder any more than there is a legal one. The killers of children stand convicted and guilty and sentenced by the fact of their crime, even if they be kings and popes and rulers.

That is the powerful message in today's Gospel reading from Matthew. It is made doubly powerful by how closely it reflects how things operate in the world of politics and rulers, then and now. For this is a story of the ritual killing of children: one of the oldest practices in history, and a practice of Church and State as common as war and genocide.

A group of so-called "wise men", hired and dispatched by King Herod himself, search out a rumor that a baby has been born who will overthrow King Herod. Like any politician, Herod blithely cons the not-so-wise men into being his agents by saying, "I want to worship this new-born Messiah too!". The murderous intent is always surrounded in a religious garb; for is it not a fact that people, and especially rulers, can far more easily kill and order killing when they believe in a God who sanctions and forgives their deeds? And so, like obtuse academics or unwitting spies on a secret op, the bright boys go to work for the killer on a throne. They eventually discover the little threat called Jesus and dutifully inform the King. Are these wise guys naïve, or just doing their job, or simply stupid?

Either way, their news frightens Herod and makes him even more paranoid than normal, like anyone with a lot to lose. He sees conspiracies everywhere, distrusts his Bright Boys, and tries to have them arrested. Failing that, he then goes after baby Jesus, using the information so conveniently provided by his think-tank Wise Guys. But Jesus and his family have been tipped off and already skedaddled to a safe house. Frustrated twice, Herod must save face and so like any ruler feeling his power slipping, he orders mass murder. Every child in the area who is under two years old is killed. This clumsy scatter gun approach fails to hit Jesus, of course. One can hear the Gospel writer chuckling up the sleeve of his robe, despite all the bloodshed.

Warning, Exile, Murder: the old pattern of Corporate Damage Control. And then of course comes Stage Four, the Great Mourning of this ritual killing that can never find comfort, the cries that never stop in any heart that still lives. That's how this Gospel story concludes. It's the Biblical answer to official murder, to the ones who never worry about covering up their mess because they know it's all legal.

The Bible says, sure, worldly rulers can get away with anything, even the ritual, Satanic slaughter of children. Just look around. But the survivors are a threat to all of that, for they can remember the crime and the fallen. They can keep the truth and their memory alive: but only if they keep on shouting about it, loudly and publicly. That is the power of mourning, of letting God's own pain and outrage at the wrong shout out forever, through we, the survivors. It is our duty to the fallen.

It's amazing how even at his birth, Jesus caused hysteria among rulers and posed such a threat to established authority. Our innocence and honesty always evokes that reaction in the guilty and causes them to come down on us. Like any truth teller, Jesus became a refugee from state terror from day one and a wanderer in poverty and exile. And he stayed that way to the day of his judicial murder. So it's no accident that Jesus has always been a symbol and inspiration to the poor and oppressed everywhere, for his life and death as the permanent outsider mirrors their own experience of the world.

Middle class church goers are another matter. They can't relate to the man, except as an abstract cult figure. They tend to be left cold the human Jesus and by any equating of him with rebellion or the underclass, even though scripture is full of such imagery.

As a clergyman, I constantly experienced this dichotomy between who Jesus is to the poor and to the affluent. Jesus' first message proclaimed in the Nazareth synagogue - that he had come to set the captives free, raise up the poor and open the prison doors - tended to alarm or confuse my wealthier parishioners, but it brought a smile of relief and amusement to the street folks or Indians in our pews.

This divide became even greater between people when Jesus concludes his proclamation by announcing that he is inaugurating the traditional Hebrew event called the Jubilee Year: a social revolution where all debts are cancelled, and the land and wealth is shared equally among all people. Jesus has been causing upset and turning things upside down ever since the day of his birth.

That fact, and today's Gospel message, don't exactly fit the festive, feel-good middle-class Christmas season. For it lays out the four turbulent realities that characterize Jesus' life and work, like a cycle of life and death: a warning of danger, an escape into exile, a massive killing, and a mourning for the fallen. To understand that, let's go deeper into those four actions in this story by understanding their word origin and meaning.

The first action is a warning, issued by unseen protectors: Get away now, or you will be destroyed. The Greek word for "warning" is *craymatzo*, which means to be admonished by God and given a new purpose and name. In other words, you're not only yanked to your feet suddenly but garbed in a new identity to allow your escape. Call it divine camouflage. How else can we navigate a murderous and deceptive world?

Second step: fleeing into exile. The word is *feugo*: in Greek and Latin, it means to fly away, but it also means to be saved by shunning evil and departing from it. So the fleeing is not an act of fear but a positive step into inner cleansing, of separating ourselves from the evil around us. Going into exile from everything we know is our first spiritual act in order to reform ourselves according to a higher, heavenly aim. Throughout our many myths and legends, the Hero leaves his country and people to go into foreign lands in order to discover his true strength and purpose.

And because of that, the boot comes down. The Empire strikes back; state terror slays the innocent. In Matthew 2 verse 16, the Greek word for "slew" is *anairew* (anaheereho), which means to steal and then exterminate, the way animals are bound, penned in and then ritually slaughtered. The same word is used to describe sacrificing an animal, or in this case, children. It is part of a massive blood ritual going back thousands of years, whereby people believed they were purified by the killing of what is totally pure and innocent. The Hebrew word *kadush* means two things at the same time: to sanctify and to sacrifice. We make something holy by murdering it.

And there you have it: the source of the crime. For wired into the language and thought of Judaeo-Christianity is the ancient tribal belief that one cannot truly worship God and be made pure without ritually murdering the best, the purest, the most innocent among us.

Why else were the first-born children of the Canaanites bound and thrown into the fire pit of their insatiable god Moloch? Why was God's own first-born son Jesus sacrificed on a cross? And why today is the death of the first-born children of Ninth Circle cult members in the Catholic and Mormon churches the ticket of admission into the higher circles of those organizations? Innocent blood is still believed to be our key to worldly power and ultimate paradise.

What can one do in the face of this monstrous infamy but wail and mourn without end? This kind of unending Lamentation follows from the "blessed" crime. In verse 18, the word for "lament" is *thraynos*, which means "to cry out forever"; but it also means "to warn, trouble and frighten". As the mothers of the slain children who cannot be comforted cry out in their agony, they are also issuing a warning to the world: one that troubles and frightens, as it must. For what else can rouse a complicit population to do more than simply feel sorry for the victims?

The Gospel message, and especially today's reading, is not meant to be politely listened to without causing an eruption in the listener: an inner turmoil that breaks us free from the chains of slavery forged on us since birth. Without that inner explosion, our hearts and lives will continue to be unmoved by the mass murder of children, and we will continue to refuse to stop their killers.

And so now, you too have been warned to flee from such an association with death. You must accept a new name and purpose and go into exile from all that you have known if you are to be fit to bear witness to the crime, and to give voice to the grief. All of this is for a higher purpose: to make you fit to be the means of God's revolution, by which the blood-soaked rulers and their evil prince of darkness are destroyed as the new creation dawns.

As Jesus says later in the Gospel of Matthew,

“That which you refuse to do for these, the least of my children, you refuse to do for me.”

May the great mystery lead you from this land of lies and murder and remake you in your own exile to be fit for the coming world, and for the least of these, our suffering children. Amen.



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