

WHY IS THIS STORY HERE?

Matthew 2:13-18

Holy Innocents—it makes for good drama to the story of Christmas and the Wisemen. Over the centuries painters have portrayed it. But it is a story only found in Matthew's Gospel. Matthew says:

When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi (Wisemen), he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were 2 years old and under in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.

We may picture in our minds a massacre of thousands of innocent babies—a slaughter. But there is no record in the histories of Herod to confirm it. Some scholars say it is confused with how Herod killed several of his own sons because he thought they were going to assassinate him. The great Caesar Augustus was said to have commented about Herod, “It is safer to be Herod's pig than his son.”

So, was there a massacre in Bethlehem? We have to remember that Bethlehem was no city. It was not even an Ames. Think Kelley or Cambridge. The number of boys two years old and under may have been no more than 5-10. No wonder it was never mentioned in the histories of Herod. They have been called “Holy Innocent,” martyrs of the Church. But they were not Christians. They were boys caught in the path of Herod's paranoia. They were no holier or innocent than the millions of children who have died a violent death. They are such a small number in comparison to the babies who have been aborted. They certainly didn't die because they or their parents followed Jesus. So why are they even mentioned in the Bible?

The story is part of Matthew's story about how Jesus was kept alive by God warning Joseph to flee to Egypt and by the Wisemen being told in a dream not to tell Herod when they found Jesus. But why does Matthew even tell this story of the horrible death of children?

Matthew shows us why. He spends more time telling us not about how Herod was led to kill the children, but that this all happened as a fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecy where Jeremiah said, “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.” Rachel, the beloved wife of Jacob in the Old Testament, was buried just in view of Bethlehem. For Matthew the story of the Holy Innocents is about fulfilling the prophecy of the Old Testament. It helps us to see how cruel Herod was, so we see why Joseph, Mary, and Jesus needed to escape to Egypt. And going to Egypt was important so that when Herod died, Joseph could bring the family back and fulfill the words of the prophet Hosea, “Out of Egypt I have called My Son.” Not only that, but when Joseph came back to Bethlehem, he found out that Herod's son Archelaus was as bad as Herod, but only controlled the south near Bethlehem. So, Joseph left Bethlehem not for Egypt, but to return to Nazareth where he had come from originally. This fulfilled the promise of Isaiah that a shoot

would come from David's family. Jesus was raised in Nazareth, which comes from the Hebrew word for "shoot." In the story of the Holy Innocents we see all the details that assure us that Jesus certainly is God's promised one.

As God, God could just snap His fingers and solve everything. He could make us sinless. But God chooses to work in us not by His power, but by His love. So, He chooses to work through real people in real history.

We see that in Jesus' life. Caesar Augustus proclaimed a census that caused Joseph and Mary to go to Bethlehem where Jesus was born in fulfillment of the Old Testament. He did it at just the right time when a formation of the stars and planets had the Wisemen go to Herod and then to Jesus looking for the King of the Jews. Herod's jealousy caused Jesus to go to Egypt where He could be called out of that land after Herod died. By doing that Jesus' life redoes the life of the Old Testament people of Israel who were called out of Egypt by the Exodus under Moses. But where they failed to be faithful to God, Jesus was. God later used the jealousy of the Pharisees and the priests and the fear of Pontius Pilate to get Jesus nailed to the cross.

We see God also working after Jesus ascended into heaven. When Stephen was killed the Church was scattered out of Jerusalem to spread the Gospel of Jesus to places outside of Jerusalem. God used the jealousy of Saul (who later became St. Paul) and other Jews to do this. The jealousy of the Jews led many non-Jews who regularly went to synagogues and were called "God-fearers" to convert to Christianity. He used the expulsion of Jews from Rome under Emperor Claudius to bring Jews like Aquilla and Priscilla to leave Rome and come in contact with St. Paul and be of great service to him. He used the destruction of the city of Jerusalem in 70 AD by the Romans to make people turn from the temple to trusting in Jesus, especially as Jesus had predicted that event. He used people like Peter, who often put his foot in his mouth, Paul, who persecuted the Church, and young Timothy to share the news of Jesus.

The same is true today. God continues to work through real people in real time. In time of disaster, Christians often come forward and help people, and that opens doors for Jesus to enter. When the tsunami hit the Indian Ocean people in Banda Achai, Indonesia, which is about 99% Moslem, invited Christians to help them rebuild. The African nation of Liberia was split by a civil war. Many Christians were forced to leave, but they fled to the neighboring country of Cote d'Ivoire and started churches there. Our friend Kebede in Ethiopia has told us that bad harvests have led to people asking him for help. Not only have they learned better farming techniques from him, they have told others among the mainly Moslem population to seek help from the Church.

God works in our lives as well. One controversy we hear of is the news about how we can't be sure that the writers of the Bible wrote what is in our Bibles. Our earliest copies of the New Testament were written 300 years after the originals. It is more like a 2000-year gap with much of the Old Testament. How can we be sure we believe in the same things that Abraham, David, Elijah, Mary, and Peter believed? God not only inspired the writers who wrote the Scriptures, He has also made sure that the true message has been passed down through the years to you and me.

God didn't stop when the words got written down. The Holy Spirit works so the truth of God can be passed down through many generations, in different languages and cultures, and into each of our hearts. Even with errors in copying the Scriptures and differences in translating it, the Word of God is still the Word of God. God also guided who copied the Scriptures, who taught it to people, who memorized it and passed it on orally from generation to generation, who used the printing press to make copies easily, as He does preachers, teachers, parents, and Bible study leaders who share it today.

And He also makes things happen in our lives. He allows our lives to be "tipped over." Winter is here with its bitter cold. But the cold also freezes the ground. As it freezes, it expands. This causes the soil to be "worked up," to be loosened up after it thaws for spring planting. God can use "cold" times in our lives to "loosen" them up, so that His Word can get deeper into our lives. And God makes things happen so we can in turn be the means He uses to bring Jesus into the lives of other people. Every week someone comes to this church because they heard from someone else about it. People from all over the world join us because God can use us to open His doors to Him. Just on Wednesday while we were at home celebrating Christmas, these doors were opened so that the Sudanese community could celebrate Jesus' birth together.

So why is the story of the Holy Innocents in the Bible? Because the story of Jesus is God's story, but a story worked through us humans, because in Jesus God became fully human, so that His story is our story.