



Rachel weeping for her children: a Christmas story

Matthew 2.¹⁻¹⁸

Introduction

Like so many Americans, I have been watching and listening. I have been listening to the hateful rhetoric of a candidate and then president I call Caligula; a rhetoric cheered and championed by his admiring hordes—many of them “Christians.” I have been watching what is taking place at American ports of entry, including especially those on the southern border. I have watched children torn out of their parents’ arms and placed in holding cages with nothing but a thin mattress under them and a thin blanket over them as they waited to be placed in the homes of strange caretakers who can’t understand their anguished night-time cries for lost parents. I have watched American soldiers armed as if for war at the border. I have watched desperate men, women, and, yes, innocent children teargassed. I have watched as one international law after another is broken by a renegade nation.

All of this has reminded me of Christmas.

“What?!?!?” you say.

I’ll explain.

Yes, the Christmas Season is upon us once more. As I have contemplated the scriptures that we associate with the joyful season, I have been, once more, absolutely stunned by the

revelations that continue to flow as a result of the U.S. election of 2016 in which a mad American electorate placed the most contemptible of men in office; a man who looks for all the world like Egypt's Pharaoh of the exodus, Rome's Pilate of Jesus' death, and—appropriate to the season and today's homily—Judah's Herod of Jesus' birth.

I am struck by how we tell many of scripture's ancient stories. I am struck by how we tell them to obscure rather than illuminate; to hide rather than engage in faithful confession; to absolve ourselves of vile temptations and their commensurate deeds that we seem incapable of resisting. Our beloved Christmas narratives are no exception. They, too, suffer at the hands of our abuse. Our reading of them is as selective and as cloaking as our reading of any other scripture narrative.

Unfortunately, through much of my adult life, and much to my condemnation, I served as a co-conspirator in the coverup. I did this, largely, through the “neo-orthodoxy” that I taught. A neo-orthodoxy focused on the very real and very deep grace, and the long-suffering mercy of an indescribable Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Yet, with the election of a blatant blasphemer of God, one wonders—I wonder--if “the day of grace [has] passed... both temporally and spiritually.”¹

Be that as it may, I cannot remain silent. Can't stop preaching. Can't stop trusting in “the virtue of the word of God.”² Even if I were to say,

“I will not make mention of him,
nor speak any more in his name...”

Yet,

¹ Mormon 2.¹⁵

² See Alma 31.⁴⁵

“his word [is] in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones,
and I [am] weary with forbearing,
and I [can]not stay.”³

So, in today’s homily, we will take one narrative of our larger common Christmas story, bring it up to date, and, with it, strip away our practiced camouflage.

Rachel weeping for her children

The story starts out pleasantly enough.

“Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judæa in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, Saying, ‘Where is he that is born King of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him.’”⁴

We know from a thousand previous readings and narrations that these storied wise men, by following the fabled star, were led “into the house.” Here, they achieved their quest, for

“they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.”⁵

How wonderful! How glorious! A king is born. No, not *a* king. The King. The King of kings.

It is certainly appropriate at all times, but especially during the Christmas Season, for the preacher to “commend” that his audience diligently follow the faithful example of these wise men, and

³ Jeremiah 20.⁹

⁴ Matthew 2.¹⁻²

⁵ Matthew 2.¹¹

“seek this Jesus of whom the prophets and apostles have written, that the grace of God the Father, and also the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost, which beareth record of them, may be and abide in you forever.”⁶

Let us, indeed, like them, “worship him” and give him whatever humble gifts we can.

But this is not all or the end of this Christmas story. Not by a long-shot. Whatever the reasons for our habit of telling just this much, we can no longer allow such attenuation. This new day in which we find ourselves demands that we tell the whole story. It demands a new revelation. It demands that we go beyond the traditional jolliness of the season and consider more deeply what it means to worship him and what gifts he might have us offer.

And so, the demands of the day take this preacher’s mind in new directions; into new revelation. We are now called to acknowledge that there is an ugly side to this holy story, and that it, too, is part of the Christmas story and the season’s message.

For, you see, there is another king.

“When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.

Apparently, not everyone enjoys Christmas. But, what’s not to like? “What,” we might ask, “was Herod thinking!? What were the privileged citizens of Jerusalem thinking when they chose to follow their leader’s anxiety-filled lead?

Well, Herod and his people had much to lose. Any number of individuals had arisen in recent years with the claim of royalty and right to rule in place of Herod and the Romans. Each time, people suffered, were imprisoned, tortured... died. Blood flowed in the streets of Jerusalem. It was the responsible and patriotic thing to do: be pre-emptive; find the upstarts early and get rid of them.

⁶ Ether 12.⁴¹

So, it was that in this child, this infant, this babe in arms, Herod and those like-minded with him could only see a threat. A threat to their power. A threat to their security. A threat to their way of life. Such a threat, though uncertain—as if seen through a glass, darkly—must be extinguished. This is no-holds-barred conflict. The threat calls for extreme action.

“Then Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceeding wrath, and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently enquired of the wise men. Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by Jeremy the prophet, saying,

‘In Rama was there a voice heard,
lamentation, and weeping, and great mourning,
Rachel weeping for her children,
and would not be comforted,
because they are not.’”⁷

Now, this is extreme vetting, indeed. Select out all children two years and younger. Bring in your most trusted and unscrupulous storm troopers. And begin the butchery.

If we read this part of the story at all, we read it in a bubble. We pretend that it is an isolated event with little or no meaning except that Evil, represented by Herod, hated Jesus in one particular historical moment. Such a reading is mere caricature. It is false. It allows us to remain in hiding.

But the evangelist is prophetic. He sees things. He is a see-er. He knows that this attempt to scape-goat innocents, even helpless children, to allay personal fears and do the “responsibly nationalistic” thing is all too human. He knows that it has happened before him. Repeatedly. And he knows that if he does not shed the light of “gospel” upon such doings, more innocents will suffer persecution and die—repeatedly, and without any more insight into the evil of such doings than before.

⁷ Matthew 2. ¹⁶⁻¹⁸

In quoting Jeremiah, the evangelist reminds us of earlier Babylonian atrocities perpetrated against Judah's most vulnerable population: children. Babylon's Nebuchadnezzar and Judah's Herod are made of the same cloth. From their point of view, the logic of state-sponsored violence, including murder is absolute and irrefutable. Victimizing children is an effective and blunt terrorist tool. It serves numerous purposes. It intimidates and pacifies the adult population. It reduces the future threat that the children themselves represent. It guarantees, it is arrogantly asserted, national security and stability. And, just in case there are those who doubt it, it reaffirms the state's right to a monopoly of force.

The story of Herod and his murder of innocents is an important and essential part of the Christmas story. It is not there because it is uncommon and unique to this narrative. Rather, it is there because it is extraordinarily ordinary. We can no longer skip it in favor of happier themes. It has a message for us today.

What is that message? I'll let you ponder that for a bit. While you do so, we will have a look at another story. This one is not associated with Christmas. Rather, it is associated with the Jewish festival of Passover. It has much, nevertheless, in common with our Christmas story and can legitimately be considered alongside it.

Let us deal wisely with them

“Let us deal wisely with them.”

These words are too important, too pregnant with meaning to be quickly passed over, as is so often done. Herod might have spoken these words to his people as his agents slaughtered Bethlehem's innocent babies. But these presumptuous words were spoken by another monarch, a pharaoh, some millennia and a half before Herod.

We hear in this politically correct assertion of royal wisdom and prerogative another politician who, “responsibly,” lives in and infects others with fear. Patriotic fear. The Israelite population in Egypt is growing. Because of that growth, in just one generation the

Israelites have moved from being favored refugees seeking asylum from malnutrition and starvation to being thought dangerous resident aliens that were upsetting demographic balances and threatening national security. Though the evidence for the threat is minute, perhaps even non-existent, the delusion is presented as fact:

It will happen that “when there falleth out any war, [the Israelites will] join also unto our enemies, and fight against us...”⁸

What could possibly make more sense that this? What could be more responsible and patriotic?

Foreigners are criminals, constantly on the verge of open rebellion. Wisdom is indeed called for. By “wisdom” of course, Pharaoh means the institution of zero-tolerance policies that are harsh and extremist. The extremism, as we all know, takes the form of Israelite bondage. But even this isn’t enough to silence the metastasizing fear that the leader has introduced into society. Something more is needed. We must find a sure-fire way of getting everyone’s attention.

The children.

“And the king of Egypt spake to the Hebrew midwives... ‘When ye do the office of a midwife to the Hebrew women, and see them upon the stools; if it be a son, then ye shall kill him: but if it be a daughter, then she shall live.’”⁹

Again, we witness extreme vetting. It would require a huge and dedicated bureaucracy, no doubt, to conduct such a purge. Sensing, however, that this may not be enough, the leader cleverly stokes his subjects’ latent fear—fear of the other, fear of another—anger, and insecurity. This fear and anger and insecurity metastasizes into ugly public cooperation in genocidal violence.

⁸ Exodus 1.¹⁰

⁹ Exodus 1.¹⁵⁻¹⁶

Thus we see, as Mormon said, “how much iniquity doth one wicked king cause to be committed, yea, and what great destruction!”¹⁰

Unfortunately for Pharaoh, his state apparatus, and his undiscerning subjects, he and they really aren’t in charge after all. They will not be allowed to have their way.

“And the LORD said,

‘I have surely seen the affliction of my people which are in Egypt,

and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters;

for I know their sorrows;

And I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians...

Now therefore, behold, the cry of the children of Israel is come unto me:

and I have also seen the oppression wherewith the Egyptians oppress them.”¹¹

We know the rest of the story and how it ends. The rationality and legitimacy of Egyptian power over Israelite life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness is questioned and rejected. The nation’s right to murder infants is challenged. Egypt’s oppressive power over oppressed populations is extinguished, not only by the destroying angel, but in the waters of the Red Sea.

Conclusion

Matthew’s Christmas story declares God’s bold entry into a darkened and course and violent world. With God’s entrance, he introduces his unique “grace and fidelity.”¹² He invites individuals and societies to come unto him and partake of his goodness and mercy. He declares himself Savior and Redeemer. But he is more than a *personal* Savior. He is also Lord and King, Savior of society. These are the “glad tidings of great joy” that we associate with Christmas.

¹⁰ Mosiah 29.¹⁷

¹¹ Exodus 3.⁷⁻⁹

¹² See John 1.¹⁷

But this, too, is part of the Christmas story: such tidings do not gladden everyone. Matthew introduces bad news in the very same breath that he introduces the good news. He does this by introducing Herod onto the stage, and thereby warning us that there are other would-be kings, potentates, rulers, and presidents. They do not welcome a new King. They do not appreciate the light that serves, after all, only to expose their dark arts of domination.

The Evangelist, John, utilizes this same pattern of introducing the bitter with the sweet in his Gospel. John, abandoning Matthew's "historical" example of Herodian resistance, adopts a more "theological" approach. No sooner has he introduced "The Word"—The Word that is the light of the world—than he must address the near universal resistance to that Word.

“And the light shineth in darkness;
and the darkness comprehended it not....
That was the true Light,
which lighteth every man that cometh into the world.
He was in the world,
and the world was made by him,
and the world knew him not.
He came unto his own,
and his own received him not.”¹³

This incomprehension and revolt, too, are part of Matthew's Christmas story. His story doesn't begin with just one king, but with two. More than a personal Savior, the child is born to be a king; a king that will challenge the rules and rulers of this world. And, we are warned, he will be challenged and face resistance to his rule every step of the way.

These resisters, never very imaginative, will resist in the same old tried and tested ways of antiquity. Predictably, then, their resistance to Christ and his people, as it was with Pharaoh and Herod, will encompass the contemptible attack on innocent men, women, and, yes, children.

¹³ John 1. ^{5, 9-11}

In our own day, rulers and thugs such as Syria's Assad, who attacks children of his own countrymen as they cower in bombed out apartments or in beds of devastated hospitals; Saudi Arabia's Bin Salman, who rains down American made missiles on Yemeni children's school buses; and America's Caligula, who threatens, kidnaps, and sickens the American military on refugee children already traumatized by the violence of their home countries; all these and more have rediscovered the same ancient logic. They have brought out of obscurity the same dark and secret "oaths and covenants"¹⁴ of ancient lore.

But, thanks to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the Christmas stories that introduce it, such dark and benighted attitudes and actions that once passed as "logical" and "responsible," and "patriotic" are exposed for what they are: anti-Christ. The Christmas babe exposes the lies our modern leaders foist upon their citizens. We are left without doubt—this child, Jesus, and his murdered "peers" are innocent. They pose no threat, but to the most hardened and delusional tyrant. So, it is with all innocents and with all children. Those who would use "national security" as justification for doing them harm clearly identify themselves as modern day Herods.

Fortified with the discerning revelation of the gospel, we come to understand that any who would persecute, oppress, and kill children for any reason, but especially in the name of "national security" are anti-Christ. Those who attack such innocents are not simply engaged in "politics as usual." Rather, they are engaged in something extraordinary. Herod's attack upon innocent children—associated in his mind with an attack upon a specific potential claimant to the throne, one we know to be "God Himself"—informs us that he and his likeminded brethren of all eras are engaged in deicide; for, "inasmuch as you have done it unto the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me."¹⁵

Tragically, even in this post-gospel age, with the full light of this revelation shining so brightly into the darkness, dictators, princes, and presidents continue to practice the dark arts. Even more tragically, they do so with full support of sizable portions of their populations.

¹⁴ See Helaman 6.²⁵⁻²⁶

¹⁵ Matthew 25.⁴⁰

Most tragically, in America, those who profess to be Christians, have far too often been foremost to pronounce, “Amen,” “so let it be,” to such anti-Christ attitudes and behaviors.

This Christmas Season, *this* preacher invites *his* readers to seek, and worship, and gift Mary’s holy babe by standing against the current Herodian tactics that assault innocent children everywhere, leaving thousands upon thousands of “Rachels” fearing and weeping for their children; for, such tactical assaults are tantamount to deicide.

In doing so, the preacher is not glib. He knows what he is asking. He knows that we are engaged in a war that has its beginnings out in the cosmos before the creation of this world.

We are all familiar with Paul’s admonition to “put on the whole armour of God.”

“Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might. Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.”¹⁶

We are familiar with the appurtenances of this battle gear: the breastplate, the sandals, the shield, the helmet, and the sword.¹⁷ We know these help us stand against personal temptation and sin. But we often miss the specific temptations and sins Paul had in mind at the time of his writing these words.

“We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the *rulers of the darkness of this world*, against *spiritual wickedness in high places*.”¹⁸

Not unlike the mockers and abusers who stood about the cross of Christ falsely believing that they were strong and free and independent, rulers of the nations of the world who imitate and duplicate the dark atrocities of the ancient world are really stand-ins for the one who controls them: “the prince of this world.”

¹⁶ Ephesians 6.¹⁰⁻¹¹

¹⁷ Ephesians 6.¹⁴⁻¹⁷

¹⁸ Ephesians 6.¹²

But thanks be to God, Paul also assures us that as we stand against the demonic powers that operate in human forms and institutions, however high and intimidating and self-assured and self-promoting they present themselves to be, “our Lord Jesus Christ... gave himself... that he might deliver us from this present evil world.”¹⁹

The Christmas Season with its beloved Christmas narratives not only remind us that there are powerful forces that oppose the babe born to be king and those who would follow him, but that that same babe born to be king will have the ultimate victory over those satanic powers. In these wonderful narratives, we see “the exceeding greatness of [God’s] power to us-ward who believe.” We see Jesus, set

“at his own right hand in the heavenly *places*,
far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion,
and every name that is named,
not only in this world, but also in that which is to come.”

Yes, we see that God

“hath put all things under his feet,
and gave him to be the head over all things to the church,
which is his body,
the fulness of him that filleth all in all.”²⁰

And with that happy and victorious ending, we wish you a Merry Christmas!

¹⁹ Galatians 1.³⁻⁴

²⁰ See Ephesians 1.¹⁹⁻²³