

The Work of Christmas
Matthew 2:1-8; 13-23
Westside Fellowship CRC; 13 January 2019
Rev. Heidi S. De Jonge



Leon Cogniet – Killing of the Innocents by Herod - 1824

I've preached from this text a number of times before, but something new struck me in my research this time around and this new thing is the **laziness** of Herod. The laziness of Herod. Let me explain.

Here we have Herod – the king of the Jews – on his throne in Jerusalem, and some Magi come saying that a new king has been born and they are they to worship him. Herod, who is already the king of the Jews, is disturbed by this, so he gathers the smartest people around him and asks if he can get any confirmation on this. The chief priests and the teachers of the law say, well, yes, according to the prophet, Micah, the Messiah is coming and he is to be born in Bethlehem. So, he sent the Magi to Bethlehem to make a search and asked them to report back to him on what they found so that he could worship the new king as well.

I never thought about it before, but Dale Bruner pointed out that Herod could have, himself, taken the 2-3 hour journey to Bethlehem and sought out the child himself. (*Matthew,*

p. 68) Or he could have sent some people to go and to take care of the threat to the throne. He could have done it right then. OR, when he realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi – the Magi who did not return to him as he had asked them to do – he could have THEN gone on a search for the specific child... He wouldn't have found him, of course, because they had fled for Egypt, but he could have made a specific search. Instead, he made an order to have all baby boys two and under killed. And all this, Bruner called sloth. And that caught my attention.

There is a slothfulness about getting the Magi to do his search for him... and there is a slothfulness about making a blanket order to kill all the boys under 2, rather than doing the more careful and particular work of looking for and excising the single threat.

Herod was lazy... it's the laziness that comes with power and privilege. I think this struck me because this is not what you usually first think of when you think of the horrors of Herod. You think of his desire to kill Jesus and his willingness to kill all those innocent children. When we think of Herod like that, he seems very 'other'. His sins seem so far removed from our sins. But when we look at his laziness and sloth born of his power and privilege, perhaps we can see how Herod is a reflection of us all—all of us who feel threatened by one who might be coming to take our power and privilege away from us—all of us who feel threatened by anyone who might be coming to be the king of OUR kingdom, the queen of OUR queendom... and the scattershot way we lash out in order to protect what we think is ours and to protect it with the least amount of specific energy possible.

If this isn't making a lot of sense, let me add another lens, like the eye doctor dropping down another circle of glass to see if the text on the wall becomes clearer. Dale Bruner also writes this about Herod: "Those who begin by hating the Child end by hurting children" (p. 68). And this has always stuck with me. Herod begins by hating the Christ child, and that spreads out into his hurting of children – the hurting of vulnerable children. I think the inverse is also true. Insofar as we hurt children we are showing our hatred for the Christ child.

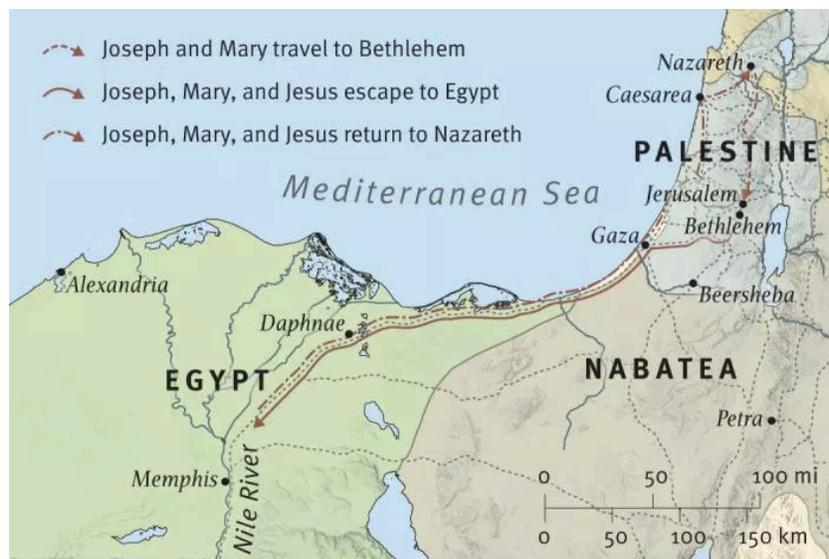
And when I think of the way that I hurt children, particularly my own children, it is in the vein of the deadly sin of laziness and sloth. (See how I'm bringing it all together here?) Slothful parenting is parenting with indifference and a lack of care. It is failing to take the time to pay careful attention to each of my children's needs. It is not listening to what they are really

saying... it is being wrapped up in my own little world of my needs, my time, my agenda. It is blowing up in a scattershot fit of rage. And this hurting of children shows my hatred for the Christ child. As Jesus says in Matthew 25, whatever you have done to the least of these we, have done to him.

This tendency toward carelessness, I believe, can be expanded to other vulnerable persons. Insofar as we hurt them – the homeless, the mentally or emotionally challenged, the refugee, the person on the margins – by not taking the specific and careful time to get into their lives with them, we are showing our hatred for the Christ child.

The Greek word for the deadly sin of sloth is *akedia*, which means a lack of care or an indifference. If this was Herod. If this is us under the sway of deadly sin, this is the very opposite of God. Far from not caring – it was from his deep care and love for the world that God sent his only son to us. And far from indifference, the specificity and hyper-intentionality of God’s love can be seen in all the gospels, and even in this story of Jesus here in Matthew 2 – from before he could even speak.

I’ve mentioned this before, in a message on this text, but when you look at the journey that God sent Jesus on – by prompting Joseph through dreams – you can see that it is a specific journey. A journey with a geography that we are supposed to be paying attention to.



Jesus was brought out of the promised land and escaped to Egypt. After a time, he was called out of Egypt and was brought back to the promised land. This is the same journey Israel took! Out of Canaan, escaped into Egypt because of famine, and then called out of Egypt and back to the promised land. It is as if Matthew is saying, Look! Here is the New Israel! God took great care to move his son in such a way to show that Jesus had come to save by taking a journey... a journey of fleeing and escape... a journey of coming home... a journey that the Israelites had taken.

But now I want to focus on the place that Jesus ultimately landed. He landed in a town called Nazareth. And then Matthew says, "So was fulfilled what was said in the prophets that he would be called a Nazarene" (Matthew 2:23). But, get this, it is not at all clear which prophet or prophets Matthew is referring to. This is not a direct quotation from anywhere. It could be referring to Samson, the judge who was a Nazarite... set apart and holy (Judges 13:5, 7; 16:17). Or Matthew could be referring to the prophecy that a "shoot would grow from the stump of Jesse, from its roots, a branch/twig (*netser*) will bear fruit" (Isaiah 11:1).

Or, it might be that we are to focus on the fact that Nazareth is a nowhere town. It doesn't get mention in other lists of Judean towns. It's Nowhereville, and it may be that we are supposed to focus in on the lowliness of Jesus' new hometown, a lowliness that the prophet Isaiah focused on. It could be that we are supposed to see that Jesus, in his first few years of life, took a very specific journey – thus identifying with the Israelites... and then landed in a very unheard-of place – thus identifying with all the lost and lonely and unheard of – those on the margins of religion and society.

Jesus came both to fulfill the law and the prophets, but then, in what would have been unexpected for the role of the Messiah – he came to seek and to save the lost... He came to identify with the downtrodden and unknown and misunderstood. Jesus – the King of the Jews... and the Nobody from Nazareth. And indeed – this was the sign that was placed above his head on the cross... Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews.



All this to say that God. Took. Care. God took great care in his coming to us in such a specific and patient way. God came to this world in a way that left no one out. And God came to this world with such great specificity. And God came to this world and, in Jesus, took TIME to be with people. I loved Tim's sermon last week, as he talked about the playfulness and the touch of Jesus. I kept thinking of the way that Jesus was with children. How he welcomed them and took them into his arms and blessed them. How he had time for them when no one else did. Of course the Christ child grew to love children. To love the vulnerable.

And he invites us to show his love for him by doing the same... by taking time for all those that we may be tempted, in our most deadly and sinful moments, to not take time for. And this love is the opposite of sloth... it is work. It is good work. It is, what Howard Thurman calls, the *work* of Christmas.

*When the song of the angels is stilled,
when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,
the work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost,
to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry,
to release the prisoner,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among brothers,
to make music in the heart.*

(Transition to song, *Away from the Manger*)

Away from the Manger (Refugee King)

Words and Music: Liz Vice, Wen Reagan, Bruce Benedict, Greg Scheer, Lester Ruth
based off the traditional carol "Away in the Manger"

1. A - way — from the man - ger they ran for their lives. the
 2. No stars — in the sky but the Spir - it of God. the
 3. Stay near — me Lord Je - sus when dan - ger is night. And

7 cry - ing boy Je - sus, a son they must hide. A dream — came to
 down — in - to E - gypt from He - rod to hide. No place — for his
 keep — us from Her - ods and all of their lies. I love — Thee Lord

13 Jo - seph they fled in the night. and they ran — and they ran and they
 par - ents, no coun - try or tribe. and they ran — and they ran and they
 Je - sus, the Re - fu - gee King. and we sing — and we sing and we

19 ran. and they ran — and they ran and they ran.
 ran. and they ran — and they ran and they ran.
 sing! and we sing, — and we sing, and we sing!

25 Oo - oo - oo - oo.
 Oo oo oo.
 Al - le - lu - ia!

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