

January 1, 2023
Rev. Eric Dillenbeck
Matthew 2:13-23 and Isaiah 61:10 - 62:3
“No Good Deed Goes Unpunished”
Rocky River Presbyterian Church

“No Good Deed Goes Unpunished”

Isaiah 61:10 - 62:3

¹⁰I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for The Lord has clothed me with the garments of salvation, my God has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. ¹¹For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

^{62:1}For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch. ²The nations shall see your vindication, and all the kings your glory; and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will give. ³You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.

Today's appointed passage from the Gospel of Matthew actually takes place AFTER the text that will center our worship next week. By placing this story right in the middle of the Christmas season, the creators of our Revised Common Lectionary reversed the natural order of the story. Next week in our Family Room Worship service, we will celebrate Epiphany worship around the warmth of a shared table. Epiphany is the day when the wise men appear to pay homage to the infant King born in Bethlehem. But this week we get to dwell with what happens after the wise men depart Bethlehem by a different road in order to avoid Herod. This is a passage that is omitted from most Christmas Pageants and story books, but it is an important part of our Christmas story.

Let us turn our attention to and listen for God's Word speaking to us this day from:

Matthew 2:13-23

¹³Now after the wise men had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, *“Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.”*

¹⁴Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, ¹⁵and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, *“Out of Egypt I have called my son.”*

¹⁶When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. ¹⁷Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: ¹⁸*“A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.”* ¹⁹When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, ²⁰*“Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of*

Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead." ²¹Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. ²²But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. ²³There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, "He will be called a Nazorean."

One: This is the Word of the Lord

All: Thanks be to God

Christmas is barely five days, or twelve verses, old and already Matthew inserts this horrible story of King Herod's massacre of the babies of Bethlehem. We are not ready for the ugliness of this passage. It's Christmas; we want to be dwelling at the side of this infant, rejoicing in the first noel, but here...

here we are confronted with the realities of the world in which we live and into which Jesus, our Emmanuel, was born. For us Christmas is about celebrating the birth of that cute, sweet, little baby Jesus who came to bring Peace and Blessings to the world.

The gentleness of infants and favorite hymns like "O Little Town of Bethlehem" help us to believe that things were peaceful and quiet in Joseph and Mary's life, but we must remember, they had a newborn in their lives. Let me tell you, no matter how wonderful newborn babies are, they are definitely not quiet and peaceful all the time.

As much as our Hymns would like us to think, For Mary and Joseph, When Jesus was being born things were not as peaceful as we like to imagine. A plot was hatching in the mind of Herod. He sent the wise men to Bethlehem to greet this NEW king and to return to him with a message about where this royal heir could be found. When they did not return things became a lot less peaceful.

Scripture tells us that Herod did not know exactly where the child was located, only that he was born in Bethlehem. So to make sure that he did not miss his mark he ordered that all babies under the age of two be killed. You see, like many who have worldly power Herod was hungry to stay in power. No matter how young, Herod could recognize a rival, a threat.

Josephus, an ancient Jewish historian recounts Herod's legendary paranoia and jealousy. And while no historian recounts this particular bloody incident, Josephus does help us to know that Herod was an awful man who caused widespread bloodshed, even having two of his own children and one wife assassinated. So it seems that this kind of Christmas chaos could quite possibly have happened on the streets of our sweet little town of Bethlehem.

I am sure not many of us like this part of the Christmas story: Joseph and Mary packing everything they could carry onto the back of another sweet donkey and fleeing into exile from a tyrannical King Herod. We don't like the idea of our savior being carted out of harms way by frightened parents as other parents weep and wail over their incredible loss.

We want to sit at the side of that manger and sing "Joy to the World the Lord has come Let earth receive her King," but in telling this Christmas story Matthew reminds us that not all were ready to receive this cute, sweet little baby king, much less make room for him.

Why does Matthew tell this story? None of the other Gospel writers include an account of the despair of that day. Matthew could have left this part out; he could have introduced the wise men, let them come bearing their gifts and then allowed them to fade out of the story like the shepherds. But he doesn't.

He helps us to see what we already know. He helps us to name that when God breaks into the world there will be a worldly response and it will not always be pretty, peaceful or what we expect. He helps us to see that no good deed goes unpunished. Those in power recognize true power and they react. We want to gather together and worship the Holy One who came into the world to bring peace, but Herod reminds us that the world wants to assert its power – political leaders vie for our allegiance and votes by shrouding themselves in Christmas trees and glad tidings, world figures are assassinated, wars rage, and corporations manipulate the message to help boost their profit margins.

I once heard another preacher say it this way,
“Whenever Jesus is born in Bethlehem,
Herod wakes up in Jerusalem.”

God enters into the world and the world takes notice. There have been other times when God has entered the world and we know from Scripture that the world definitely noticed. In his telling of this story the author of Matthew seems to be going out of the way to draw allusions to another time when God entered the world, though not quite in the same way.

Do you see the similarities this story holds with another baby we know of in Scripture? When Moses was a cute, sweet little baby, The Pharaoh killed other little ones to get rid of him, but he too was carried away to safety. Moses wasn't even God's own child, but his blessedness riled up those in power.

Matthew tells us this story to help us hear that God is once again working to bring about our salvation. God is working through the poorest of the poor, homeless refugees, to bring forth a savior for the whole world.

We can't control how the world will react to the news, we can't predict how those with power will respond. But like Joseph and Mary and like Miriam before them, we are called to help bring forth God's salvation. We must listen for the voice of angels telling us to get up and go and we must be agents for peace.

And when the Herods of this world go on a rampage in order to retaliate for the good deeds that challenge their power, we must grieve with God, but we must also sing, for we know there is a Joy that has come into the world that no darkness can overcome. We know that God has been born as a babe in a manger in the heart of Bethlehem.

So in the heart of this Christmas season let us live with hope, confident that God comes to us; confident that God is stronger than Herod; confident in that cute, sweet, little baby Jesus who lived and breathed to fulfill God's promises.

Joy to the World.
The Lord has Come.
Let Earth receive her King.
And may every heart prepare him room.

Amen!