

010 The Serpent Strikes – and Misses

Matthew 2:13-23

Message by Dr R Bruce Montgomery ~ Grace Church ~ 2/11/18

Ah, Bethlehem! The town where Jesus was born. “Bethlehem.” The very word conjures up feelings of peace and joy and happiness. Images of angels and shepherds and Mary and Joseph, cattle lowing, and at the center of it all the baby in the manger.

The name Bethlehem is a compound word, comprised of the Hebrew *beth* meaning “place or house,” and *lechem* – “bread.” It is used in Hebrew prayers to represent food and sustenance. We give it a similar meaning in English when we pray, “Our Father . . . give us this day our daily bread.” We mean, “give us our nourishment, provide for our basic necessities.

Later in the gospels we will read that Jesus claimed “*I am the bread of life.*” How fitting then it is that the place he is born is known as the “house of bread.”

That’s the geographical place where we were when we left off our story of Jesus last Sunday, with the Wise Men from the East visiting the infant Jesus, worshipping him, giving him gifts.

After they had done what they had come to do, we pick up the story in Matthew 2:12 *And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.*

Matthew 2:16-18 *When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.*

¹⁷ *Then what had been said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:*

¹⁸ *“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*

A little different picture than the normal word association if I were to ask, “*what comes to your mind when I say ‘Bethlehem.’*”

We sing Christmas carol: “*O Little Town of Bethlehem*”

*O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep, the silent stars go by.”
Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light
The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.*

But Matthew’s Christmas pageant doesn’t end with tinsel covered angels proclaiming good will, nor the wise men bowing down and presenting their gifts to the infant king, but with Rachel weeping for her slaughtered babies.

It will never make the hymn books, but a final verse would go something like this:

*O little town of Bethlehem, how mournful is your cry!
There is no sleep, for in your streets, you saw your babies die.
There is no hope, no comfort, no quenching of your tears
For nothing can erase those nightmares and your fears.¹*

How can such things be?

It’s hard to accept the fact that the gospel – the good news - has enemies, but there it is. Herod disturbed, all Jerusalem unsettled, calling in the experts in Scripture, faking it, pretending to want to worship this new born king but soon writing death warrants against the boy babies.

The stamping of horses’ hoofs and soldiers’ feet pounding the pavement, the house-to-house search, lamps out early, mothers clutching babies behind cellar doors, “*shhh, shhh, shhh. Don’t make a noise. Don’t even breathe.*”

The butt of swords crashing in doors, and the points of swords slicing open children despite the mothers’ pleas, “*not my baby! Please, not my baby! Kill me if you must have blood, but spare my baby!*”

It’s hard to believe. It’s hard to accept that good news has enemies. But there it is in Matthew.

Rachel crying, refusing to be consoled. “*They’ve killed my children; they’ve killed my children!*” Vultures circling over the shallow graves of the children of Bethlehem.

Why? Jesus Christ is born! Good news! It’s hard to accept that the good news has enemies. It’s even more difficult to accept that announcing the good news creates the enmity.

¹ Words by R. Bruce Montgomery

All the wise men said was, “*Where is he that is born king of the Jews? All we want to do is worship him,*” and trouble broke out. They weren’t revolutionaries, they didn’t put up posters, they didn’t march through the city crying out with bullhorns, “*out with the old, in with the new; vote for Jesus, not Herod.*”

All they said was, “*we want to worship Jesus.*”

Do you know how to really release the Serpent hatred in the world? Stir that scaly thing to crawl up from the floor of hell and wreak violence in the earth? Just say, “*All we want to do is worship and adore the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.*”²

There is such a thing as evil, and there is such a thing as wicked people. Herod the Great, who we could more properly refer to as Herod the Paranoid, or Herod the Ruthless Murderer certainly earns that label. He was not a “good” man.

But he was a smart person. As an intelligent person he attacks what he perceives to be a real threat to his way of thinking, and, more importantly, his way of living. Herod grasped what was at stake at the birth of Jesus. This new king, though now just a child, could dethrone him, take allegiance of the people away from him and rule over him if he doesn’t get rid of him.

But if we stop there, laying all the blame at the feet or in the twisted mind of Herod, we miss the bigger picture. He is a tool in Satan’s hands. Satan uses our fears, our insecurities, our weaknesses for his own purposes.

I John 3:8 *he who does what is sinful* (I think we can agree that Herod was sinful) *is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work.*

And just what is “*the devil’s work?*” Jesus gives us a good description of it in **John 10:10** *The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy.*

Specific to this story is the enmity between the serpent and the seed of the woman – prophesied in **Genesis 3:15**. It was an attempt by Satan to destroy Jesus.

² Jesus later spelled it out **Matthew 10:34** “*Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.*”

That’s not all the story. The serpent strikes, but he misses! Back up to verse 13

Matthew 2:13 *When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. “Get up,” he said, “take the child and his mother³ and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.”*

Matthew 2:14,15 *So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, ¹⁵where he stayed until the death of Herod.*

In Matthew’s gospel, what links the various passages about Joseph together are his dreams.

This second direct revelation comes to Joseph immediately after visit of Magi (the first “Star Trek!”)

Many people have dreams - what is important is their response to them. Joseph is obedient.

When God’s angel revealed what’s about to happen in a dream, he doesn’t hesitate. The angel’s message had a sense of urgency. Herod’s soldiers were even then on the march. Joseph immediately believed and obeyed God’s will, escaping with his family that very night under cover of darkness.

The journey to Egypt is long and dangerous in itself. It would have only taken the family three days to cover the sixty miles to the border, and beyond the jurisdiction of Herod. ⁴ Do they travel at night? Would take longer. Probably travel light. Jesus and his family survive, but they survive as refugees, abandoning any livelihood Joseph may have developed in Bethlehem.

Where did Joseph and Mary get the money to make such a journey? Remember what we read last week - the wise men had given them expensive gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. These gifts provided the means to pay for the trip, their living expenses while they were in Egypt, and the return to Israel (which we will look at next week).

³ Note that Matthew carefully chooses his words to remind his readers of the fact of the virgin birth. Though Joseph raised Jesus as his son, he was not his biological father.

⁴ Egypt had become a Roman province 25 years earlier.

Historians estimate that there were about one million Jews living in Egypt at the time, some of whom might well have been either relatives or friends of Joseph and Mary.

Narrative turns

At first read, it appears that the narrative turns on responses to external guidance - dreams, visions, and a star - but that is surface. Something much deeper is happening. Scripture is being fulfilled.

Matthew 2:15b *And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son."*

Matthew 2:17 *Then what had been said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:*

Of all the chapters in the gospels, none are more clearly linked to the Old Testament than Matthew 1 and 2. The OT quotes confirm that some of the unusual twists in the story are not by accident, but are in fact part of God's eternal plan for the Messiah.

To a lesser extent – only because not so many people are as affected by them – the things that happen in your life are not by accident either.

God has a purpose and a plan for you and your life. Realizing that makes a huge difference in gaining a proper perspective of what in the world is going on.

Another thing that is equally important to make sense of things is to realize that we are in a spiritual battle.

God's protection

Time and time again the serpent strikes to inject his venom. From Genesis to Revelation we read of his attempts to kill the line and descendants of the Son of God.

Serpent doesn't just strike at Jesus, but seeks to paralyze or destroy his children.

Down through the ages innumerable kings, governments, dictators, parliaments, terrorists have tried to solve their problems by murdering Jews.

Read the books of Exodus, of the Judges and Kings, of Esther in the Bible. Remember and reflect on the Russian pogroms, Hitler, ISIS.

The real enemy of the kingdom of God is the kingdom of Satan. The underlying driving force behind radical jihadist Islam

isn't economic disadvantage or political oppression. It is Satan's insatiable hatred of the Jews and the God of Israel. And by extension, any nation or people who ally themselves with Israel – such as Christians or the United States.

Satan is described not only as a serpent, but also as a *roaring lion*. **I Peter 5:8** *Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.*

Remember his work we mentioned earlier: He comes to rob, kill and destroy. He'll try to devour your peace of mind, he'll attempt to destroy your health, he'll try to undermine your financial stability, steal your contentment and hope, undermine your faith in God, he'll try to damage your relationships. In short, he's trying to ruin your life, keeping you from the abundant life God wants you to enjoy.

Thank God he still protects his people against the ravages of the enemy. In just a minute we will sing song "*Greater is he that is in me!*" Scripture is printed above order of worship in your bulletin today. Found in I John 4:4b.

But we are not just bystanders in the conflict. We have an active role in the battle.

Ephesians 6:6 *Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes.*

When the serpent comes slithering into your life, don't let him bite! Have your snake repellent ready.

I Peter 5:9 *Resist him, standing firm in the faith . . .*

James 4:7 *Resist the devil, and he will flee from you*