

Matthew 2:13-23
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Flight to Egypt

The Roman Empire spoke often about peace. Pax Romana—the peace of Rome. But as one historian has said, Romans regarded peace not as the absence of war, but when all opponents had been beaten down and lost the ability to resist. Peace, in that sense, was enforced silence. Order maintained by fear.

Herod was a prime example of Pax Romana. Historians agree that Herod was terrified of losing control, and he was swift to use murder as a tool to protect his throne.

- **Executed close family members** he suspected of disloyalty, including his wife and several sons.
- **Killed political rivals and nobles** who could challenge his authority.
- **Crushed unrest harshly**, using soldiers to suppress opposition and deter rebellion.
- **Ordered executions based on fear and suspicion**, often without fair trials.

Herod ruled through **fear, intimidation, and calculated brutality** to maintain power, making violence a defining feature of his reign.

Into this reign of terror, Matthew writes, a baby was born. One heralded by travelling Magi as the King of the Jews. And like tyrants before and since, Herod responded with violence. Hatred. Self-seeking control. He could not care less about the devastation, blood and destruction upon the innocent.

Matthew reminds his readers that God's saving work does not arrive in a safe or gentle world. The light of Christ shines into a world marked by fear, violence, and the abuse of power.

It is easy to condemn Herod. Harder to confront the Herod within us—the places where we cling to control, fear rivals, or protect ourselves at the expense of others.

In this way, Herod is not just a villain in an ancient story. He is a mirror. We may not command armies. We may not issue decrees. But we know what it is like to pursue our own agenda—big or small. We know what it is like to protect our comfort, our reputation, our way of life. And often, if we are honest, we are not very interested in having Jesus change who we are or rule in our lives.

So the Gospel asks us hard questions. Are we ready to let him come and save us from all the ways we rely upon injustice and violence done in our name to preserve our comfort and status in this world? Are we willing to see the ways innocent lives are lost so that we can maintain the lifestyles we hold dear? Are we ready to weep with Rachel for the lives destroyed as we import our tasty delicacies, fill our wardrobes, and change the climate?

So perhaps our response to such a troubling text can only start as prayer.

“Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Lord, have mercy.”

Mercy for the ways we benefit from systems that harm others.

Mercy for the ways we look away from suffering.

Mercy for the ways we resist letting Christ rule our lives.

Against this darkness, Matthew places before us another response: the quiet, faithful obedience of Joseph and Mary.

Remember the story we recalled together last week: I am God's servant. I say "yes"! When the angel first came, they said "yes" to God—come what may. They did not know where that yes would lead. Refugees, fleeing a tyrant king, raising God's Son on the run.

I have a relative who every year quotes the poem of Minnie Louise Haskins, made famous by King George in his 1939 Christmas address.

And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year: "Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown." And he replied: "Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the Hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way."

Joseph receives a warning at night. He does not argue. He does not delay. He gets up, takes the child and his mother and leaves everything familiar behind. Home. Family. Safety. Livelihood. This is faith lived out under pressure. Forced to flee violence. Dependent on the mercy of others. Living in a foreign land, waiting for the day when it might be safe to return home.

And Matthew is careful to tell us: even in this chaos, God is at work. "Out of Egypt I have called my son." God is weaving the story of salvation through danger, fear, and displacement. The powers rage against this child, but they do not win the day. Try as he may, Herod cannot kill this king.

Jesus escapes to Egypt, but Matthew does not have us harden our hearts. Matthew makes us sit with grief. "When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under."

Then Matthew quotes the prophet Jeremiah:

"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."

Rachel—the beloved matriarch of Israel, the mother of Joseph and Benjamin, ancestor of God's chosen people. Her name becomes the voice of all mothers who grieve children stolen by violence. Her tears echo across generations.

Think of the parallels in Exodus. Pharaoh orders the Hebrew baby boys killed at birth. Later, Egypt's own firstborn will die in the final plague. How many times throughout history have the innocent paid the price for fallen human depravity?

Rwanda, Rotingya, Beothuk, Cambodia, Cree, Ukraine, Auschwitz, Guatemala, Northern BC, Gaza, Venezuela...

Rachel is still weeping.

She weeps for refugees driven from their homes.

For children forced into militias or sold through human trafficking.

For those who live in fear—fear of violence in their homes, fear of gunfire in schools, fear of what tomorrow might bring.

This Gospel does not ask us to look away from that pain. It names it. It honors the grief. It refuses cheap consolation. It moves us to care for those who still walk the path of the Holy Family today. People forced to flee home by tyrants. Those imprisoned and killed for allegiance to King Jesus. Innocent children, men and women, victims of evil intent and action.

The Flight to Egypt reminds us that following Jesus does not guarantee safety—but it does promise God’s presence. We were fortunate to spend a couple days this week with Jason’s sister and brother in law who work for Wycliffe Bible Translators. Having spent 10 years earlier in life in northern Thailand coordinating projects, they now work out of Calgary sharing the stories of the worldwide work of linguistics, translation, social and spiritual transformation. As we listened to the stories of love and literacy, each one was touched by risk, sacrifice, grief, faith and courage. I was moved once again by these brothers and sisters in Christ for whom God is present in circumstances I can hardly imagine.

God present in the fleeing, in the waiting, in the returning. God with and among the endangered children. God present with the grieving mothers. God with those who obey even when the cost is high.

God does not abandon the world. God’s light pierces the darkness not with spectacle, but with guidance, presence, and faithfulness. Quiet messages of direction.

And so the story turns again. Herod dies. Another angel appears: “Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel.” And again Joseph obeys. Still cautious. Still discerning. When danger remains, he goes to Galilee, to Nazareth—an ordinary place, a forgotten town—so that what the prophets spoke might be fulfilled.

This is how God’s salvation moves forward: not through the halls of power, but through obedient faith; not through violence, but through vulnerability; not through domination, but through love that is willing to suffer.

And one day—God will bring an end to Herod’s kind of power. God will frustrate the designs of evil tyrants. God will establish a kingdom not built on fear, but on justice, love, and peace. Until that day, we live between tears and hope. Between Rachel’s weeping and the angel’s promise. Between the cross and the empty tomb.

So let us remember today the Holy Innocents. Let us refuse to forget their cries. And let us commit ourselves anew to the way of the child who escaped Herod, who faced Pilate, and who even now reigns.

We remember today, O God, the slaughter of the holy innocents of Bethlehem by King Herod. Receive, we pray, into the arms of your mercy all innocent victims; and by your great might frustrate the designs of evil tyrants and establish your rule of justice, love, and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.