

A Storytelling Commentary on Matthew 2:13-23

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Now after they 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.”

Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night,
and went to Egypt, and 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.”

When 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.

Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through 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.”

When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared
in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said,
“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.”
Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother,
and went to the land of Israel.

But 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.

There 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.”

How are we to understand and tell this story that is so violent in the season of Christmas? First of all, Matthew is making connections with the stories of Moses and the prophets. The beginning of the story of Moses has a similar motif. On the orders of Pharaoh, the Egyptians slaughtered the male children of Israel (Exodus 1). Moses was delivered from death by his mother’s courage and the compassion of Pharaoh’s daughter. The deliverance of Israel from slavery was initiated by God’s deliverance of Moses from the brutality of Pharaoh. Here the deliverance of Israel from the powers of evil is initiated by God’s deliverance of Jesus from the brutality of Herod.

The implication of Herod’s decision to kill all the male children two and under was that Herod had determined from the wise men’s story that they had first seen the star about two years before their arrival in Jerusalem. Herod concluded that the new king must have

been born about two years ago. A further implication is then that Jesus was almost two years old at the time of the wise men's visit.

The prophecy of Jeremiah (Jer. 31:15) is a vision of Rachel, Jacob's wife and the mother of Joseph and Benjamin, weeping over her children as they were taken into exile in Babylon. Rachel is here described as the ancient matriarch of the nation weeping over the fate of her children centuries later in the era of the Babylonian conquest (587 BCE), the exile, and the life of Jeremiah. For Matthew this prophecy is a sign that this tragedy was foreseen by Jeremiah and was within the foreknowledge of God. Thus, while tragic, and an indication of God's limited power to determine human events, it will be reversed by God's determination to save and liberate Israel by the birth of the Messiah, Jesus.

The story of this action by Herod was also congruent with the history of the reign of Herod the Great. Herod was extremely paranoid about plots against his life especially in the last years of his life. As an old man, Herod suspected, probably rightly, that various people in his family were plotting to assassinate him and take the throne. In 7 BCE he executed his two sons, Alexander and Aristobolus. Three years later, only five days before he died, Herod executed his firstborn son and heir apparent to the throne, Antipater.

Thus, the story of the slaughter of the infant boys of Bethlehem is totally believable as an action by Herod the Great. But in Matthew's perspective, God knew what Herod was going to do, sent a messenger to Joseph and saved his son from death. Herod's insane action will not subvert God's intention to save Israel. Jesus' divine parent protects the son, the young child, Jesus, against this threat to his life.

After the death of Herod, the angel is sent again to bring the child back to the land of Israel. But because of the instability of the new king of Judea, Archelaus, Joseph returns to Nazareth in Galilee, instead of their previous home in Bethlehem in Judea (near Jerusalem and the king). Archelaus' instability is evidenced from historical records and he was finally deposed by Rome after ten years of despotic rule.

Matthew is setting the birth and early years of Jesus into the context of the history of Jesus' time. It was a violent and turbulent time. But the impact of the story is wonder at the action of God who saves his son from the maniac, Herod the Great.

What then are we to understand? God's power to control human events is limited. In the modern world, as in the ancient world, politics are often lethal. We have experienced this in the 20th century, the most violent century in human history, in the genocides of millions of innocent people by Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, and Pol Pot.

Nevertheless, God's purpose to deliver the human race from the powers of evil by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is active and present. These immense tragedies, like the slaughter of the innocents, will be held within the will of God to

ultimately save and redeem humanity from the power of evil. We need to pay closer attention as a human community to what God revealed through Jesus Christ about the ways that will lead to peace. That is what we celebrate at Christmas, the hope and the promise of peace on the earth.

This story has four episodes:

1. The flight to Egypt
2. The massacre of the innocents
3. The return to Israel
4. The location in Nazareth

I've arranged the episodes in three sentences each. Three of the episodes end with the fulfillment of prophecy, which is a major verbal thread: "This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the prophet": in the first episode, "out of Egypt"; in the second, the prophecy of Jeremiah about Rachel weeping for her children; and the third, "He will be called a Nazorean."

Another major verbal thread is the angel's command to flee and Joseph's immediate action. In the first episode the angel tells Joseph to: "Get up, take the child and his mother and flee to Egypt and remain there until..." Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, went to Egypt and remained there...." The first two sentences are virtually a repetition of one another.

The pattern is repeated in the third episode: "Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel..." followed by "Joseph got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel." These verbal threads link the internal parts of the episodes.

The other major verbal thread is the link between "Joseph got up, took the child and his mother and went to Egypt" and "Joseph got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel." These two sentences are also linked by a common verbal thread of the journey to Egypt.

There are extreme dynamics and contrast in the feeling tone and the emotion of each of this story's three episodes. The first and the third episodes are very quiet, while the second is loud and violent prior to the report of the mothers' grieving and the prophecy of Jeremiah. This story of Herod killing all the children in and around Bethlehem is one of the most terrifying stories of the Gospels.

The last episode is much more calm than what has preceded. It is peace after the violence of the massacre. In terms of its dynamics, the episode feels safe and secure after the violence that is first anticipated and then fulfilled in the massacre.

Each statement of prophetic fulfillment is a statement by the storyteller directly to the audience giving them inside information. Therefore, these statements need to have a different tone than the other parts of the story. The tone I recommend is not unlike the

tone of the statement to Joseph by the angel, but that is in a dream, whereas the statements of fulfillment are spoken directly to the audience. They are a moment of connection between the storyteller and his or her listeners.

This is a particularly dynamic story in terms of its emotional quality and the intensity of its feeling and tone. The spirit of the story is a spirit of safety and security in the midst of extreme violence. God rescues God's son from death.