

## Reality Check

Rev. Annita Peebles

Matthew 2:13-23

December 29th 2020



Happy Birthday, church! Happy 150 years!

Though we have been celebrating 150 years of ministry with our Seattle neighbors for several months now, yesterday was truly the 150th anniversary of when the first 11 people gathered in the winter of 1869 and covenanted together to form a community. Christmas was barely over and a new decade was coming in fast, and yet, our Baptist ancestors gathered to commit to doing life together, to being church together. They signed a document called the New Hampshire Covenant, popularized by the American Baptist Publication Society in the 1850s and handed down through some Connecticut forbears to the folks who gathered in newborn Seattle to form First Baptist. Here's what the New Hampshire Covenant says:

“Having been led as we believe by the Spirit of God to receive the Lord Jesus Christ as our Savior, and on the profession of our faith, having been baptized, we do now, in the presence of God, angels, and this assembly, most solemnly and joyfully enter into covenant with one another, as one body in Christ . . . to walk together in Christian love, to strive for the advancement of this church, in knowledge, holiness, and comfort, to promote its prosperity and spirituality, to sustain its worship, ordinances, discipline, and doctrines, to contribute cheerfully and regularly to the support of the ministry, the expenses of the church, the relief of the poor, and the spread of the gospel through all nations.”

We probably wouldn't use this language today to express what we do here together as we follow the way of Jesus the Christ, but we can still appreciate the passion and dedication of these founders as they promised to “solemnly and joyfully enter into covenant with one another...to walk together in Christian love.”

So that was 150 years ago yesterday. I wonder what happened next. What happened 150 years *today*? What happened on December 29? Did some of those folks wake up and say, “What do we do now?”

And on this December 29, I echo that question. Christmas Day has come and gone. Yes, we are in the middle of the 12 Days of Christmas, which lasts until Epiphany. But the presents and the glitter and the still, soft singing of Silent Night are over for another 360 days. What do we do now?

Our Scripture today is one of those texts that serves as a reality check for us. At Tim and Patrick's Boxing Day drop-in on Thursday, I found myself sitting in a corner chatting with our

own Eric Jeffords about my process for sermon writing. During our conversation, he asked, “How do you know what text to preach on?” And that’s a great question. Some of you may know that usually Tim and Patricia and I use the Revised Common Lectionary to guide our preaching schedule; the RCL was made so that every 3 years a church would go through the whole Bible about one time. This fall, in honor of our 150th Year, we chose passages related to themes we wanted to focus on; and we departed from the lectionary in Advent as well, as we chose to read the beloved nativity sequence from Luke’s gospel. However, just as with any holiday, our festivity must come to an end somehow, and we return to the lectionary, to the assigned reading for this day in the church year. And this one, my friends, is a tough one. Sometimes I feel I need to remind us that there should be content warnings for the Bible, and this is one of those times. So take care of yourselves, friends. Do what you need to do to steward your wellbeing in this service.

Our Scripture today is from Matthew chapter 2, verses 13-23.

**13** 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.” **14** Then Joseph[h] got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, **15** 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.”

**16** When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men,[i] 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.[j] **17** Then 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.”

**19** When 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.” **21** Then Joseph[k] got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. **22** 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. **23** 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.”

This text is challenging. Difficult. Heartbreaking. Hopeful. This text teeters on a tightrope between being a text of terror and a prophetic promise. And, after the festivities of this last week and the sacred and sentimental readings from Luke's gospel, this text is our reality check.

Esau McCaulley, a professor at Wheaton College and an Anglican priest, questions, "Why is it important that the church calendar tells this story at the beginning of the Christmas season?...The church calendar calls Christians and others to remember that we live in a world in which political leaders are willing to sacrifice the lives of the innocent on the altar of power. We are forced to recall that this is a world with families on the run, where the weeping of mothers is often not enough to win mercy for their children. More than anything, the story of the innocents calls upon us to consider the moral cost of the perpetual battle for power in which the poor tend to have the highest casualty rate."

I find it deeply meaningful how Scripture works on me, if I let it in and live alongside it for a while. And this text is no different. It takes no creative gymnastics to find similarities between the story captured in this Scripture and our own time. Perhaps so little extrapolation that it makes us uncomfortable, it raises our defense mechanisms.

For example, a debate has been raging on Twitter recently, concerning this passage of Scripture. Some people think that calling Jesus a refugee is not correct, based on the geological growth of the Roman Empire and the way us contemporaries think about borders and the lack of historical evidence for the murder of children in Bethlehem. Others, rightly, remind these Tweet-ers of the power of story, that these events are not necessarily 100% historically factual, and, most importantly, of the definition of refugee, "people who have been forced to leave their country in order to escape war, persecution or natural disaster." Jesus, as he reminds us in Matthew chapter 8, had nowhere to lay his head during his formative years, from his birth in a manger to having his life threatened and leaving his home to attempting to return home only to more worries about political persecution from the government. And so, yes, from this story, we understand Jesus as a refugee, or an internally displaced person. To preserve his life and give him hope for a future, his family left their homeland. Departure and return were central to Jesus' early life, and we echo these movements on this Sunday as we return to Scripture texts that cause us pause, that force us to check ourselves, that disorient us following the comfort and brightness of the Christmas holiday.

There is nothing sentimental about the Christmas story in Matthew. This is one reason why your pastors put our heads together and decided to hang out with Luke's gospel, with Mary's magnificat and Zechariah and Elizabeth and Anna and Simeon and shepherds and angels and twinkling stars praising God. No heavenly choir announces Jesus' birth in Matthew, there are just some astrologers who are ordered to spy for a tyrant. No snuggly sheep or protective oxen watch over the baby, just a family fleeing in the middle of the night.

As we depart from the holiday season and return to our regularly-scheduled lives, the stories about the movements of young Jesus' family go with us. The shepherds and sheep, magi and camels, heavenly host and star had all returned home, and Jesus' family was left alone, just the three of them, in Bethlehem, according to Matthew's gospel. And just as his Old Testament namesake did, Joseph began to dream.

Now, these weren't really good dreams, right? Maybe something good came of the dreams for Jesus and his family, but the dreams of Herod the Great's political jealousy causing him to turn to brutality against innocent children were about to become all too real. God spoke to Joseph through an angel in a dream, warning him that Herod had evil intentions for baby Jesus and telling the Holy Family to flee impending violence and hide away in Egypt. There was a promise to return someday, but at the time, Joseph didn't know when that would be.

Cut away to Herod in Jerusalem, raging and plotting a way to destroy the infant king he had been told about. He decided to take out his rage on all children age two and under in the village of Bethlehem, thinking surely the child prophesied would be swept up in the violence and "destroyed" as the NRSV tells it. And so there is weeping and lamentation over senseless violence against innocent children.

In an article entitled, "Herod, too, is the reason for the season," Matt Skinner from Luther Seminary, writes, "[it] would be easier if Herod has been an out-and-out monster. He wasn't." And this is true. Herod the Great, in power over Judea from 37-4 BCE was an Idumean appointed by Romans as a kind of puppet governor. You see, the Romans, for the most part, didn't mind how brutal a territorial ruler was as long as the region paid taxes. Herod had to fight for three years to secure his power, and history tells us that he never felt secure on his throne: he killed his wife and one of his sons because he thought they would threaten his position. And yet, as Matt Skinner reminds us,

"Herod was no madman seething on his throne pulling the wings off butterflies. Many of his contemporaries saw him as a savior in his own right...[Herod the Great] made sure his kingdom would be significant, prosperous, and protected within the emerging Roman Empire." He goes on to say, "Evil rarely presents itself as a beast with horns, fangs, and claws. Usually it dresses itself up in respectability. It burrows into systems that we rely on to keep our societies from spinning into chaos. Evil rarely acts alone. Tyranny and arrogance can't exist in a vacuum. They demand accomplices. They survive because their enablers are also contributors."

I wonder what images this text conjures for you, read today in a comfortable, warm church in a wealthy city in the USAmerican empire. How have I, have we, has our church, been complicit in sustaining evil as it burrows into systems of white supremacy, heteronormativity, transphobia, Christian supremacy and American exceptionalism? What lurks beneath the sheen of respectability that we enforce by the ways we police each other's bodies, lifestyles, finances?

How does *what we are willing to say but not willing to do* for the sake of justice make us enablers of these systems where Herod is merely the figurehead?

“Herod,” writes Matt Skinner, “would have given the order [to kill the children] but he would not wield the sword. He had people. Agents who would swoop in, pound on doors, and disappear again as quickly as they arrived...Herod was a savvy politician who knew how to use favoritism, brutality, deception, and arrogance to advance his ends. Those are the tools used by people who believe they will never be held accountable. Those are also the values that get encoded into patterns and norms that govern our daily life. They become our ethos. They make us complicit. Herod and his resistance to the reign of God remain alive and well today.”

I’m sure each of us could imagine without too much work these dynamics in our country today: people in need of jobs, of security for their families, of a story to tell themselves about “just following orders” or “standing their ground,” coerced into aligning with unadulterated power and an arrogant tyrant. And, for many of us, we are not wielding the sword, or following orders. And yet, we, too, in our various ways of holding privilege, are silent when faced with opposition; cross the street instead of look a person in need in the eye; turn our gaze from the everyday bigotry that we have been taught is normal and acceptable; assure ourselves that the brutality of empire isn’t a big deal because it hasn’t come to our doorstep yet.

Jesus was a refugee. And, like the family on the front of your bulletin today, he and his family were forced to leave their home due to threats of violence. Today, as followers of the Way of Jesus, we are called to remember his family, and to see them in today’s refugees, displaced persons and people experiencing homelessness. We are called to understand that threats of violence towards vulnerable communities do affect us, because we are all bound together as children of God. This Scripture that calls us to a reality check also invites us to place our hope in the activity of a God whose love is far more powerful than the ragings of Herod and his cronies.

Yesterday, December 28, was really just the start of our 150th year. And many of us have the question, “What do we do now?” on our lips. I offer this invitation to you, in the words of the prophetic poet Howard Thurman:

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 the people,  
to make music in the heart.

So, friends, in the rest of the 12 days of Christmas, in 2020, let's find, heal, feed, release, rebuild, bring peace and make music. Let's make sure the next 150 days, months and years of our life together are done in service to our neighbors and those living life with their backs up against the wall. In the words of our church's affirmation of values, let us "go deeper in faith as we do justice, love mercy, work for peace and walk humbly with God." The work of our 150 year legacy is not over with this anniversary. We are just beginning.