

BACK TO THE FUTURE
MATTHEW 2:13-25
DECEMBER 30, 2007—FIRST SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS
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Several years ago Carol and I had season tickets to the Philadelphia Orchestra and attended a concert I'll never forget. The program that day was Mahler's *Songs on the Death of Children* based on five poems by a German poet who wrote some 465 poems on this somber theme.

The 19th century, as we have only to remember, was a period when infant mortality and children's deaths were quite common. Three of Mahler's nine siblings died in childhood. His own daughter, Anna, died at age three.

The problem Carol and I had with the concert was not the music so much as the timing—it was two days before Christmas—and we both agreed who ever programmed that music for that week was just plain insensitive. Why spoil our holidays with songs about children's deaths?

In fact, that was the rationale the committee that selects the biblical readings for each Sunday used to justify their dropping, for many years, the story we just heard from Matthew.

Known sometimes as the "Slaughter of the Innocents" this Scripture reading the week after the birth of Jesus raises all kinds of problems not the least of which is its timing—coming in the midst of our holiday celebrations.

Who wants to hear about children being slaughtered anytime let alone when we've just finished singing *Away in a Manger* and find ourselves still enjoying this holiday that is so much about children?

In fact, we may be so acculturated by the secular versions of the Christmas season that we are blindsided by the quick move Matthew makes from manger to mayhem.

This past week on a local radio station the music selections were introduced by a kindly sounding man who advocated listening only to Christmas songs that have nothing to do with the religious meaning of the day. Songs about family, food and winter fun. I was amazed at how many there are.

But then, last Thursday we wake to the news that Benazir Bhutto had been assassinated and the nation of Pakistan, one of the nine nuclear powers, thrown into at least temporary chaos. Life has a way of shifting gears rapidly and while we can't control much beyond ourselves we can be alert.

So I would argue what we are witnessing in Matthew today with the Messiah's birth followed by a paranoid ruler's murder of children is not a poorly timed story but a very real dialogue of events between the forces of good and the forces of darkness.

Indeed, this juxtaposition of good vs. evil and light vs. darkness is descriptive, like it or not, of the human order in which we live.

Try as we might to shield or numb or avoid this truth we cannot. The reading for today embraces the reality of our world and the urgency for us to pay more than sentimental attention to the meaning of Christmas.

What does Christmas have to do with violence and death? You may remember Matthew wrote his gospel for the Jewish Christian community in Jerusalem. To give his story credibility, Matthew cast Jesus in chapter one as belonging to the lineage of David and in chapter two as fulfilling his destiny in Egypt just as Moses did.

The parallel between Jesus and Moses suggests ‘the new Moses—Jesus’ will lead his people from slavery just as did the old Moses.

Matthew doesn’t want us to miss his point: both seek refuge in Egypt, both are later led out of Egypt. Both are delivered to new identities through baptism: Israel through the Red Sea; Jesus in the Jordan. Both are tested in the wilderness and bring the law to the people: Moses the Ten Commandments, Jesus the Sermon on the Mount.

It is a striking literary trope. The more we look at Jesus the more we see Moses—the greatest leader of Israel. Even down to the details of their beginning when Moses was an infant and the wicked king Pharaoh ordered his soldiers to kill all the Hebrew babies under two years of age by throwing them into the Nile.

But Moses is saved by Pharaoh’s daughter. And later in his youth when he kills an Egyptian and flees to Midian to escape punishment, he is told to return because ‘the men who sought his life are dead’ the very same words the angel speaks to Joseph telling him to return with Mary and Jesus after the death of Herod.

Matthew is a master story-teller. You could imagine his readers nodding in agreement as they listened to his gospel read at worship, saying to themselves ‘we know this story, we have lived this story, and, praise God, now we see our story continuing in Rabbi Jesus.’

Yet, Matthew’s community was also reading the gospel through the lens of Easter. They saw the gore, the violence, the oppression of corrupt authorities as they always had but this time they heard the story of God’s people through the trumpet sounds of Resurrection

Like the movie *Back to the Future*, Matthew first demonstrates how the Jewish Christian church could read its own future by going back in history to see Jesus and his ministry as an extension of God’s original purposes for Israel.

But having established that the fledgling church in Jerusalem, facing suffering and persecution, traces its lineage back to Moses, Matthew then points them forward to Jesus’ passion and death.

Herod’s inquiry about the Messiah and his rage at being tricked then his decree to slaughter the children conveys an important message: the royal power he represents cannot tolerate the presence of Jesus.

Israel’s true king subverts all claims to absolute authority; the birth of Jesus is a powerful challenge and his death the final blow to the forces of darkness in our world. The stakes are high so the response is violent. The story reminds us that God’s acts of peace and justice inevitably and always evoke a hostile response.¹

But here is the good news: while Herod stands for the enmities that confront Jesus throughout his ministry and result in his death, the simple announcement at the end of today’s story that Herod died signals the ultimate impotence of such powers: their plotting, scheming and brutality.

But maybe you're thinking, "Christmas aside, how do we comprehend a God who permits the slaughter of innocents in Moses' or Jesus' time? Isn't such a God disingenuous, having people killed so they can ultimately be saved?"

I must say the commentaries were not helpful in addressing these questions. Various exegetical maneuvers are made to explain away the fact that lots of children in Bethlehem were killed that night by Herod's soldiers. Even if the story is a parable, violent death plays an important role in the plot.

The scholars' responses may have been academically correct but they felt spiritually dishonest. We started today disturbed by the deaths of children. Now that we see, regardless of the season, how the logic that justifies all violence justified Herod's brutality and later the Sanhedrin's just as it justified Ms. Bhutto's assassination, we're able to see the non-sentimental meaning of Christmas.

In his poem, "Esthetique du Mal" Wallace Stevens discerning human suffering notes: the part of the sublime from which we shrink is the naked fact of violence.

Or Samuel Beckett reflecting on interfamilial violence in France where he lived during the Nazi occupation said, "If there were only darkness, all would be clear. It is because there is not only darkness but also light that our situation becomes inexplicable. On these occasions, we come nearest to God, the mystery about which we must be silent, the source of both destruction and cleansing."ⁱⁱ

Beckett and Stevens honor the inscrutability of a world where violence and hope, chaos and promise exist side by side. The photograph of a man standing amidst the twisted debris of Ms. Bhutto's car, arms raised to the sky, face in anguish as my wife and I were heading out to redeem our gift certificates last week is a mundane example of what I'm talking about.

So where are we? On the one hand while we sing, "Joy to the World," each year at our Savior's birth, on the other hand we would do well to remember that our exaltations are not only for much needed time with family and respite from school and work.

Our impulse sing of his birth comes from the answer to our deepest yearning—that a new kingdom has come where violence and death do not reign.

You see this in our dating. Before the abbreviation "C.E." for "common era," – the designations "B.C." before Christ and "A.D." anno domini marked the significance of Christmas. His birth, ministry, death and resurrection are, for Christians, the pivotal point of history. So significant this we mark all time before and after his coming into the world.

Let me be clear: his appearance does not eliminate violent acts that leave nations weeping as Rachel wept for her children.

Rather, his appearance signals the advent of a new kingdom, a new domini, dominion significant for this reason: when we become its citizens it has the power to change us.

Despite living in a world created by a God from whom we shrink and who renders us, at times, silent we now know as citizens of a new realm that violence and destruction are not the final word.

What this amounts to is our living differently because we see ourselves differently—not as creatures of despair but as people who choose even at great risk to base our actions on a principle which can transcend even our greatest loss: that God’s purposes prevail.

That’s as good a reason as I can fathom for our mission volunteers to go help in the cleanup in New Orleans next week; or for you or me to donate time to the food pantry or tutoring program or a neighbor in need.

Where ever those visits occur or helping hands reach for tool belts and hammers to rebuild washed away homes and lives, you can be sure the forces of darkness and violence are themselves silenced and shrink back from people no longer intimidated or paralyzed by death.

Such is the victory the Christ child brings. Freedom from fear and despair. Freedom that lifted the old, ex-monk Martin Luther from a three-day depression when he emerged from his study with a new hymn and the words of life:

“And though this world with devils filled, should threaten to undo us, we will not fear, for God hath willed His truth to triumph through us. The prince of darkness grim, we tremble not for him; his rage we can endure, for lo! His doom is sure, one little word shall fell him.”

That’s news good enough to dry the tears of Rachel and offer a future, starting with 2008, worth living in hope and confidence. Amen.

ⁱ Walter Brueggemann, *Texts for Preaching: a lectionary commentary based on the NRSV – Year A* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1995) 71ff.

ⁱⁱ Marjorie Perloff, *Wittgenstein’s Ladder: Poetic Language and the Strangeness of the Ordinary* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1995) 178ff.