

# The Son of God

Psalm 89:1-4, 19-29, Matthew 2:13-23

Today is the day after Christmas, a strange day. A day diminished by comparison with the holiday that has gone on before us. And in our scripture the days after Christmas were times of terror, times of disaster, times of a strange aftermath. Today's reading is a hard text. There are a number of so-called "hard texts" in the New Testament. Most of them are teachings of Jesus Christ's—Love your enemy; pray for those who persecute you; if someone hits you, turn the other cheek. Texts like this are thought of as the hard texts, the hard teachings, the ones that are very difficult to obey and to follow. There are other hard texts. They talk about tithing. And there are even the stories of the crucifixion. But in my mind this is the hardest of all. The one I would least want to read. But because we have made a commitment to hear the gospel, we read this passage also. We gather here today to stand under the authority of the full word of God and the full gospel of Jesus Christ, and we dare not select only our favorite passages, only those easy texts, but we gather here to find out what God has to say to us even in these hard sayings.

In today's readings the wise men have gone home. Herod is on the prowl. Soldiers are marching. Mothers are weeping, and Jesus is on the run. What good news can we find here? What gospel is there in today's scripture reading?

The first thing that I find—and perhaps not the final but the first, the simplest, the most obvious good news in today's passage—is quite simply that Jesus outlives Herod. At the end of the story Herod is dead. Jesus is beginning his life and ministry. He lived only to die later, at the right time, in the fullness of time. But in today's reading God defeats the enemies of God. God protects Jesus Christ to carry out his ministry. One very simple piece of good news in this reading is that Jesus outlives Herod.

Something else going on here is that Matthew is telling us even more about Jesus, who Jesus is. Do you remember the story of the slaughter of male children? We have heard that story before. When God sent Moses to save his people, Israel, the pharaoh killed the baby boys and Moses alone was saved from that slaughter. That story is told again here, for when God sends Jesus Christ the new pharaoh, King Herod, again slaughters the male children, and Christ alone is saved so that he might save his people, Israel. Matthew is telling us that Jesus is the new Moses. And more than the new Moses, he is also the new Israel. His travels, his flight to Egypt, his stay there, his return, follow exactly what the people of Israel had done

fifteen- and eighteen-hundred years earlier when they were first in the promised land, then went to Egypt, and then came back.

All the fullness of the history of the people of Israel, all the promises that God had made to the people of God, come together in the fullness of time and into the one person and life of Jesus Christ. He travels to Egypt and then is brought back to Israel and he is the new Israel.

More than this, in a very calm and understated way, Matthew tells us that Jesus, the new Moses, the new Israel, is also the Son of God in fulfillment of ancient prophecy in which God said, “Out of Egypt I have called my son,” Jesus the Christ.

At this point in the gospel we have had a piling up of names and titles for Jesus, and this will continue in the chapters to come. Jesus the Christ, son of David, son of Abraham, savior of his people, Emanuel, King of the Jews, and now for the first time, son of God. For out of Egypt I have called my son.

Because he is the son of God, we find him receiving divine protection in this very dangerous time. Strangely enough the protection that God gives to Jesus is not some miracle. There does not appear a legion of angels at arms to defend him against the soldiers of Herod. Herod is not removed from his throne. The protection of Jesus Christ is the protection of flight. He is whisked away into the night, saved, that later he might stand for an act of redemption. The strange protection he is given is that of running. And of suffering. And as John Calvin read this passage and commented on it, he said even here at his birth God is already training Jesus for the cross, getting him ready for the much greater suffering that would come later on. How fascinating here that Joseph takes into his arms the lord of the universe, that Joseph saves the one who came to be the savior of the world.

Part of the good news here is that Christ outlives Herod. Part of the good news is that Christ is the son of God. And part of the good news is that we are the ones for whom Christ came. We are the ones for whom Christ was saved. We are the recipients of all the good news of this story.

Now what is it about this story—all these strange goings on after the birth of Jesus Christ, this slaughter of the innocents. We must say, we must realize, we must know that this was an act of Herod and not an act of God. As we struggle to hear this horrible story, we have to realize that this was an act of Herod against God, not an act of the will of God. What we find and read here is best understood in contrast with what we read in the first part of the chapter about the wise men. We could very well have held the two stories together into one reading.

Those whom we call wise men we knew in some older translations as the “magi.” That is very close to the Greek word which forms the basis of this passage. And you can see readily that magi is the root word of the English word “magician.” These were wise men, certainly by the end of the story. But at the beginning of the

story they were astrologers, magicians, people regarded by the people of Israel as flagrant idolaters. They were the ones who by the practice of their astrology, by the following of the stars, were led to Bethlehem, to the manger—there to worship Jesus Christ as Lord. God spoke to them through the stars of the heavens, and they accepted the invitation. They worshiped Jesus. They were converted, and that is their wisdom.

The wise men show to us the possibilities of human life lived under the mercy of God. Herod shows us by way of contrast the horror of life lived under the judgment of God. Herod was the ultimate insider, King of the Jews. And yet he chose to reject the Christ. He refused to believe the scripture. When the wise men came with this strange message, he summoned the priests and they said, “Oh, yes, oh, yes, it is going to be in Bethlehem. We know all about it. It is an ancient prophecy. One who is to be ruler of the people of Israel is to be born in Bethlehem.”

The scriptures were read to him. That was his invitation to bow down and worship, but he declined. He refused, he rejected the word of God. He rejected the revelation of God. He rejected the scripture. He rejected the Christ. He rejected the Son of God. And what we see in him is a life lived under divine judgment. When people reject the word of God, it leads to hatred; it leads to contempt; it leads to an attack on humanity, and in this case it leads to the murder of innocent babies.

Now in part this is a history lesson. Other historians confirm what a terrible, awful, ruthless, tyrant Herod the Great was. He killed three of his own sons, apparently because he thought they were threats to his throne. In order to eliminate them from succession, he killed three of his own sons. Caesar Augustus said of Herod the Great, “It would be far better to be Herod’s pig than to be Herod’s son.” This is life lived under the judgment of God.

But this passage is not simply a history lesson. The scripture is not interested in history as such, but only as history applies to us. This reading is a picture for us of human sin, of original sin, of the deaths of the horror of self-centeredness when people turn away from God, and as such, it stands as a warning to us.

We always have a tendency to think we’re not all that bad. Part of the reality of human sin is that it reduces our perception of our own sin. Sin deceives us, and we want to think that we are better than we are. The way the Protestant Reformers understood this is that sin itself is a doctrine in which we believe only because of the witness of the scriptures. The scriptures tell us we are sinners. We believe the scriptures. We acknowledge we are sinners. The scriptures tell us that we are a lot worse off than we would care to admit to ourselves otherwise.

What Matthew is telling us here is for us not to make the mistake that Herod made. For us not to be deceived into continuing in our own self-centeredness, our own self-worship, and our own rejection of Jesus Christ.

It is significant here that there are real, practical, social implications of sin. Sin is not private. It is a dangerous thing, and it spills out of individual's lives into the lives of the community. For when people reject God, and reject his Christ, and his revelation, and his word, and his scriptures—when people reject God, there is a terrible attack upon humanity. And a loss of humanity.

Well, how do these ancient readings apply to our lives today? Clearly we are called upon to be ever vigilant against the Herod within each one of us. It's easy to see Herod in someone else. That's not the point. We are called upon to be vigilant against the Herod within each one of us. We are reminded of our own need for Jesus Christ, for the mercy of God, for the salvation that Christ brings. We are reminded terribly here of the danger and the risk of rejecting Christ. In addition to that warning we are also called and invited to rejoice in the goodness of Christ. We are called to remember and to exalt in his mercy and his forgiveness. Jesus Christ does prevail over the enemies of God. He prevails over Herod. He prevails over sin, death, evil, loss, decay, and decline. Christ is our savior, and so we are urged to receive the salvation which God has won for us.

Today is the day after Christmas. It is easy to celebrate on Christmas Day. It becomes very difficult to celebrate on the day after Christmas, for on the day after Christmas, the going gets tough, and tomorrow it is going to be even harder. Today's reading reminds us: Beware of the Herod within. Having done that, worship, and obey, and rejoice in Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

*To God be the glory forever and ever. Amen.*

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