Children Dying in the Shadow of Christmas
Matthew 2:13-18

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It seems almost mean of Matthew to follow up the story of Jesus' birth with the story of babies being slaughtered by the government. If there's anything guaranteed to put a damper on the Christmas spirit, that's it. If you come to the play here on Tuesday night, you'll see the story of Jesus' birth reenacted—albeit somewhat humorously—but you absolutely will not see a scene in which soldiers come with swords to hack apart baby dolls.

You could also say that it's mean of church tradition to place the feast of the Holy Innocents on December 28, or that it's mean of the people who created the lectionary to assign this text to the first Sunday after Christmas Day. The chances are pretty good that the churches you've been in over the holidays in years past have managed to avoid this story entirely, because we prefer our Christmases to be sentimental, full of soft lighting and good feeling and smiling children. A reminder that this world is a hard place where innocent children die every day is not what we want to hear.

And yet that is what Matthew and the church after him have insisted on. It's almost as if, after Christmas, the gospel wants to say "Wake up!" Wake up from your blissful reverie and your food coma, and take a look at the real world. We are not living in a snow globe or a Hallmark card. We are living in a world where children are killed, and continue to be killed on our watch, to protect the power of tyrants and tyrannical governments.

Perhaps you've noticed this week—if you are a news junkie like me—that TV news moves immediately from stories about Christmas celebration and travel to lists of the top news stories of 2013. It's quite a jolt. This year, the pope is on the list as a kind of feel-good story, and I suppose Nelson Mandela counts as well, and the royal baby. But by and large Top Ten lists are made up of stories of slaughter: a hundred thousand in a civil war in Syria, 62 in a shooting at a shopping mall in Kenya, several at the bombing at the Boston Marathon, others in bombings in Beirut and Egypt, who knows how many by drones in Afghanistan and South Yemen, not to mention Trayvon Martin and countless black teenagers in our cities. Even more to the point of the Bethlehem slaughters, we have been reminded by the one-year anniversary of the Newtown massacre that even our own kindergarteners in a quiet town are not safe.

Matthew jerks us around like that, from the angel's message and the birth of the Messiah, directly to the story of Gentiles seeking the Messiah only to discover that the king of the Jews is out to get him. And then, while Jesus escapes to Egypt in a reverse Exodus, Herod, like Pharaoh, orders the death of Jewish baby boys. I think Matthew intends to make sure we know this story happened in the real world, the same awful world inhabited by his readers. It's all too easy to take the Christmas story and think that it is—as one of the kids in the play told us—just a fairy tale. We imagine that the birth of Jesus is happening in a Disney universe where animals talk and bow down to the new king. There is no smell in the stable, no blood in the birth, no fear in the air. But Matthew—and Luke and John in very different ways—want us to understand from the beginning that this is a story about the clash of kingdoms. Jesus came to bring in God's kingdom, and the kingdoms of this world—empires, and ruthless dictators like Herod, and even denominational hierarchies—all opposed God's kingdom and its representative from the very beginning.

Perhaps it is true that Matthew is writing to a church that is facing persecution of its own; I don't think we can know. But even if Matthew is writing for them, he is not writing only for them. It is of the

very essence of his story that the forces of this world, the governments of this world, are out to get Jesus because he stands against everything they are for. As soon as Jesus opens his mouth in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5, he is saying that we will be cursed and persecuted and slapped on the cheek—and that we must never respond in kind, as Jesus and his parents do not respond to Herod. The kingdom that Jesus announces is a way of being in the world characterized by non-retaliation and humility. It is the opposite of the world's kingdoms—such as Herod's—which stay in place by means of violence, intimidation, and selfishness.

That is the way it was in Jesus' time, and so it has been ever since. At least once, in the 19th century, we convinced ourselves that human beings had progressed beyond such things. But then we encountered the trench warfare and chemical weapons of World War I. Then we encountered the gas chambers of the Holocaust, and the fiery destruction of Dresden, Tokyo, Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The myth of human progress pretty much died then; it certainly died in theology if not among some materialists. But as I have learned a little about history and the especially the history of warfare, it has become clear to me that the first half of the 20th century was not an anomaly. Whatever stories they tell themselves about their values, almost all governments seem to maintain themselves in power by violence—overtly or covertly. And that is what the kingdom of God is up against. Matthew understood that clearly.

Herod the Great seems to have been worse than most, enough so that the Romans were distressed about his abuse of his subjects and even removed his son from power after he killed thousands of Judeans. The story of the slaughter of baby boys in Bethlehem is not found in the historical records we have from Herod's reign, but then, the incident was so minor that it would not have been mentioned. Bethlehem was a village about the size of Block Island in the winter. If it was an average village in its age distribution, there would have been about 20 boys under age two in the village. So for 20 children to be killed by the soldiers of Herod—what's the big deal? Herod executed 300 of his own court officials; he executed a wife, a mother-in-law, and several sons. 20 civilians was just a blip.

But to us the number 20 has a terrible resonance. That is the number of children killed at Newtown, five and six-year-olds gunned down. And so when we hear the story of the killing at Bethlehem, our hearts ache. We can imagine what it would mean to the parents and to the village.

Matthew tries to capture that grief by quoting from 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.

Matthew is not saying that Jeremiah was looking forward to this event in Bethlehem when he wrote. Jeremiah was writing about an event in his own time, when the armies of Babylon gathered the cream of the nation at Ramah, a town north of Jerusalem, to march them off into captivity in Babylon. There is an old tradition that Rachel, Jacob's favorite wife, the mother of Joseph and Benjamin, the matriarch of two tribes, was buried in Ramah. So Jeremiah imagines Rachel—or, we might say, the spirit or ghost of Rachel—wailing and weeping, refusing to be consoled because she has lost her "children," the people of Israel.

Now it happens that there is another old tradition that says that Rachel was buried in Bethlehem. When I went to visit Bethlehem on a tour, we passed right by her burial place and there is a monument. So Matthew draws these two towns together—Ramah and Bethlehem—and says that the same sadness of Rachel that Jeremiah associated with Ramah is now repeated in the other location where Rachel is said to be found: Bethlehem. The mothers of Bethlehem wail as the prophet said Rachel wailed. For

those who lose children, there is no consolation. In fact, there is a refusal to be consoled, and that is as it should be. At least for the time being, there is only weeping and lament.

Matthew does not minimize the suffering of Bethlehem as a village, even though he moves on. The consolation in the story is the knowledge that in a world of terrible violence and injustice, God is preparing and protecting a Savior. There are allusions, of course, to the story of baby Moses being protected in the bulrushes from another tyrant's soldiers. But, as in the book of Exodus, there is no hiding the fact that God did not save all the other baby boys. Matthew is clear-eyed on these matters: this is the kind of world we live in.

And yet, knowing that, Matthew will continue to insist throughout his gospel that the kingdom of God which has Jesus as its King is a different kind of kingdom. Even Moses' "kingdom"—if you can call it that—is established by killing Pharaoh's son and the first-born sons of Egypt, then by the killing of the Egyptian army in the sea. The taking of the Promised Land was done by violence. The kingdom of David was established by violence. But the kingdom Jesus brings involves only his withdrawal from violence. As God does not intervene to save Jesus from violence when he is an adult, God does not intervene to save these babies now. He is still Yahweh, the God of Israel, but he is no longer a God of violence. I don't think Matthew means for us to think that God has changed his ways. Although he might not say it in this modern way, Matthew understands that Jesus has given us a clearer picture of God's characteristics than was available in the tradition. And, perhaps, that Jesus was able to separate our human notions of violence in defense of national power from God's idea of how humans are to live with one another.

But I must come back to the babies. Where in our world do we see the slaughter of innocents that causes us to weep and wail? First we think of Newtown and the literal slaughter of 20 children in those classrooms. And it is a terrible thing that a year later our lawmakers have not done a darn thing to make such a slaughter less likely in the future. But we focus on that tragedy because it was so dramatic and so close to us. The truth is that around the world children are being slaughtered every day.

Children are not responsible for their own lives. Their parents, their societies, their governments, and the whole adult human race are responsible. If children die because we have done nothing, we are the passive agents of slaughter. Listen to this unbelievable number. Today 27,000 children will die of entirely preventable causes like diarrhea, measles, and malnutrition. That is like a plane full of children going down every 16 minutes. That is like a Newtown every minute. Every minute of every day another Newtown, another Bethlehem, is happening. That is not because there is not enough medicine or food in the world. It is because the leaders of government—and the citizens of democracies—lack the political will to take action. Thank God for citizens like Bill and Melinda Gates, and Jimmy and Rosalyn Carter, who have the will to take specific steps to eradicate specific diseases. But most of our leaders want to cut aid to the poor in this country and to the poor in other countries. If we knew that Herod was going to kill 20 children tomorrow in Bethlehem—and we could do something about it—wouldn't we want to prevent those deaths? We have that power in two forms: first, by using the ballot box and letters and petitions to legislators; and second, by giving from our own resources to groups that are doing good work to deliver medicine and food to children.

First, perhaps, we need our hearts to break like Rachel's. It may take weeping to get us to action, when the story of Christmas is not enough to prompt giving. 1 out of 6 children under age 5 in the U.S. faces hunger; that's 3.5 million preschoolers at risk for malnutrition in a country awash in food. And yet we are cutting the supplemental nutrition program that could help them. There are 14 million children in the US who are poor. Most of them live in working families. But in any case these children did not choose to be poor; they are not responsible to provide for themselves. Yes, their parents have that

responsibility, but so do we. Those children are our neighbors. They are children on the side of the road wounded by robbers—the robbers that are built into the very systems which make others rich.

If you think of all the children of the world—the ones that Jesus loves—the amount of need and injustice is almost too much to take in. A few examples: by 2015, there will be 40 million children who have lost their parents to AIDS. 6000 children are orphaned by AIDS every day. 158 million children between 5 and 14 are engaged in child labor. Dickens was not able to do away with that. 1 in 6 children in the world is forced to work for a living. 93 million children, most of them girls, are denied access to even basic education.

And we still see Jesus calling the children to himself, and telling us to become like them. We still hear him saying "If anyone causes one of these little ones to fall, it would be better if he had a millstone tied around his neck and was thrown into the sea." The Sunday after Christmas may be a good time—it's not too late—to consider what we can do to extend Christmas to every child in the world. It may be a good day to pause to listen to the voice of mothers weeping for their children and refusing to be consoled. Because Jesus came into that world. Because Jesus came to save them. Because Jesus has brought us into his kingdom so that we can undo the work of the kingdoms which live on the slaughter of innocents.