

## “A Price on His Head”

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*A Reflection for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Christmas*

Matthew 2

January 5, 2020

If you're reading this online,  
you can see the Scripture selections by [clicking here](#).

In the movie *The Sound of Music*, about two-thirds of the way through, it turns.<sup>1</sup> It was about whether Maria and the Captain will get together. They do. It's their wedding. Church bells peal in celebration. But slowly the chorus of chimes becomes just one bell, tolling a heavy, ominous tone. Soldiers march beneath the Nazi swastika. We're ripped from joyous celebration, to dread and terror.

It happens at Christmas too. The peace of Bethlehem's stable, the rustic manger with animals attending, the shepherds in awe, the parents in wonder, and the Baby all-glorious, sleeping in heavenly peace . . . our carols and pageants, feasting and presents, decorated evergreens and light-brightened homes. . . .

Then this: "*In the days of Herod the King. . .*"<sup>2</sup> The chiming bells become a heavy toll. It's like a slap. The real world breaks in and steals our Christmas joy.

Or, is this gospel — good news even — for ours is a world where powerful people murder children who get in their way?

### II

Herod's actions should not surprise us. He was the most powerful man around.

But he felt precarious. Powerful people often do. They're afraid of losing it all.

This king was really a pawn, a puppet enthroned only at the pleasure of the Roman empire. He'd been an outsider to Israel. With Roman help, he'd overthrown the Jewish royal family. Then he married into it to purchase legitimacy. He had many wives. His favourite, he'd executed. His three oldest sons too. He'd feared they were plotting against him.<sup>3</sup> He knew what people thought of him. So when he was dying, he had leading citizens arrested, and ordered them killed at his passing so instead of rejoicing there would be weeping.<sup>4</sup> Herod knew about causing tears.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Sound\\_of\\_Music\\_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Sound_of_Music_(film))

<sup>2</sup> Many translations put these words (or words like them) at the end of Matthew 2:1, but in the Greek text they come first.

<sup>3</sup> The Emperor Augustus once quipped, "*It is better to be Herod's pig than his son.*"

<sup>4</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antipater\\_\(son\\_of\\_Herod\\_the\\_Great\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antipater_(son_of_Herod_the_Great))

<sup>4</sup> Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone: Part 1* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 14.

So these foreign magi — scientists, philosophers, ambassadors — arrived in the royal city asking about a newborn “King of the Jews.” Herod knew there was no such thing in his house.

They brought tribute: gold, frankincense and myrrh. We joke that maybe if they were “wise women,” like those on your bulletin cover, their gifts would have been more practical. Probably not; this was not a baby shower. Anyone wise knew gold, frankincense and myrrh were tributes for a king.<sup>5</sup>

Really, the magi carried political dynamite.

You heard how Herod reacted. Ours is a world where powerful people murder children who get in their way. Before Jesus had learned to walk or talk, he had a price on his head.<sup>6</sup>

### III

Today . . .

- Ukraine: 430,000 children caught in that 5-year-old conflict.<sup>7</sup>
- Latin America: 2 million children at risk; that’s why so many families head north.
- Western Africa: 700,000 face violence and starvation.
- Yemen: almost 370,000.
- Syria: 2.5 million child refugees.
- Afghanistan: 5 million children in danger.
- Myanmar: more than a million Rohingya children forced from home.
  
- Canada: 1.3 million children are poor.<sup>8</sup>
- Canada: Half of Indigenous children are poor.
- Canada: The “Sixties Scoop” continued into the 1980s. The last residential school operated into the 90s. Indigenous children are still taken from homes and communities.
  
- The world: Climate chaos threatens all our children.<sup>9</sup>

Children are taken by powerful people. Children are impoverished by powerful people. Children are targeted by powerful people. Children are caged by powerful people. Children are displaced by powerful people. Children’s futures are sacrificed by powerful people. Children are murdered by powerful people.

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<sup>5</sup> Wright, 11.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> These global statistics come from UNICEF Humanitarian Action for Children 2020 Overview (December 2019), pp. 6-7. <https://www.unicef.org/media/62606/file/HAC-2020-overview.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Canadians statistics are from the “Just the Facts” on Canada Without Poverty’s website. <http://www.cwp-csp.ca/poverty/just-the-facts/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.unicef.ca/en/climate-change-and-children-taking-action-save-lives>

Herods. But not just Herods. Remember, when Herod was troubled the whole city — ordinary people like us — trembled with him. Ambition and pride, greed and fear can get hold of any of us. Powerful people.<sup>10</sup>

#### IV

As you listened to the Gospel readings this morning, you might have noticed how Matthew the writer slips in quotes from Israel's prophets about Bethlehem, and Egypt and Nazareth. The challenge for us is that Matthew assumed his readers would know their Bibles better than we do. His first readers did.

Each of these older Scriptures taps into a much deeper story of how God was at work. Matthew used them to show the new thing God was doing in Jesus.

Let's listen closely to the one about the mass murder in Bethlehem.<sup>11</sup>

*A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and much grieving.  
Rachel weeping for her children,  
and she did not want to be comforted,  
because they were no more.*

That's from Jeremiah, for whom this one line was in a much larger story.

God's beloved People, Israel, had suffered invasion, siege, defeat, plunder, massacre, violation and exile. Ramah was the city where their enemies assembled the exiles before marching them off.<sup>12</sup> Rachel is the classic mother, mourning and praying for her children. She is also the great mother of Israel, beloved of Jacob, grieving over all the generations of her lost children.<sup>13</sup> She is every mother (and father) in every generation, grieving and inconsolable, for ours is a world where powerful people murder children who get in the way. Rachel's cry is their cry. Is it our cry too?

God then says this to Rachel:<sup>14</sup>

*Keep your voice from crying and your eyes from weeping,  
because your endurance will be rewarded.  
They will return from the land of their enemy!  
There's hope for your future.  
Your children will return home!*

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<sup>10</sup> Stanley Hauerwas writes, "Herods must be resisted, but we must also not forget that the fear that possessed Herod's life is not absent from our own lives. 'All Jerusalem' was also frightened by the news of this child's birth." *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006), p. 41.

<sup>11</sup> Jeremiah 31:15.

<sup>12</sup> Jeremiah 40:1.

<sup>13</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *To Build, To Plant: A Commentary on Jeremiah 26-52*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 64.

<sup>14</sup> Jeremiah 31:16-17.

God meets despair with hope. We might say it this way: God meets death with resurrection.

V

Still, Rachel refuses to be consoled. She cries out. Hear her crying, and cry with her. Hers is a God-given cry, a rising-up in protest against those who would kill children.<sup>15</sup>

Someone has said that the promise of the resurrection does not mean these children are any less dead or their parents any less bereaved. That's right. What resurrection does give us is this: we can be honest. We don't have to hide in denial and lie about children who are murdered by powerful people who want them out of the way.<sup>16</sup>

Rachel weeps. She must weep. We must hear, and weep with her.

Does this rip us from behind where we've been hiding, even Christmas?

It's better than that! Jesus, this God-child born to become a refugee, Jesus breaks out of Christmas to disrupt Herod's world.

This terrible Herod-story is not an unwelcomed intrusion into Christmas. Christmas is God's most unwelcomed intrusion into territory our world's Herods think belongs to them. They are so wrong.

Jesus is God's Kingdom-come in person (Imagine that!) Jesus breaks into the kingdoms of Herods, and yes, even our smaller kingdoms, and all kingdoms that are content to sacrifice children when they get in the way.

Jesus, born with a price on his head, paid that price on his cross. For those children. For all children. For Herod! For his grave sin, and the grave sins of all Herods. For mine. For yours.

Jesus paid the price to finally wipe Rachel's tears.

*There's hope for your future.  
Your children . . . we! . . . will return home!*

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<sup>15</sup> Hauerwas, p. 41.

<sup>16</sup> David MacKinnon, cited in Hauerwas, p. 41.