

## CHRISTMAS TERROR

12-29-02

Mtt. 2

### INTRODUCTION

I expect you find the title, "Christmas Terror," a bit jarring. Some things just don't go together. Isn't Christmas all about a quiet miracle, peace on earth, goodwill, incomprehensible love, giving, and goodness? Hatred, war, terrorism don't seem to belong in Christmas. I remember in the Viet Nam conflict there was often a Christmas cease-fire. A brief acknowledgment that all our fighting doesn't belong with the message of Christmas. But Christmas is also a declaration of war on the powers of darkness, and the battle continues through the ages into our present day.

Each year, my brother writes a Christmas poem that he and his wife, Jan, then use for their Christmas cards. Last year, the Christmas following 9-11, they captured a theme I felt I'd like to focus some thoughts on this morning. For the awareness of terrorism and the evil of some is still much with us in our daily news. It also reminds us there is an ugly side to Christmas in Herod grabbing the headlines with his slaughter of all the boys two years old and younger in Bethlehem.

*This Holy Day is purged, at least for this year,  
Of silliness, all trees stripped of tinsel.  
Christ's cradle soaked in blood,  
Shepherds and Wise Men choked with smoke.*

*But even while Herod grabs the headlines,  
Leviathan spews fire, and Behemoth's on the loose,  
This Child we worship is alive in the rubble.  
"And if the foundations are destroyed...?"*

*Last week I walked along Ole Creed  
Past the giant cottonwood, lightning-struck  
In that wild, autumn storm-riven*

*But upright still on quiet roots.  
"The road up and the road down are the same road"  
Evil is the palindrome of live.*

Today, instead of Herod, it's Iraq and Saddam Hussein, N. Korea, and Osama Bin Laden with Al Quida grabbing the headlines. In the 16 months since 9-11, any naivety regarding evil has been stripped away, exposing new depths to the ugliness of such evil. Almost daily we're exposed to the calloused, heartless, cavalier attitudes of terrorists. Just the other day, more Christians slaughtered in Pakistan as they were in church worshiping. Because of terrorism and threats of more terrorism, our world feels very unsafe. But, it is also important to remember Jesus was born into a world where evil was perhaps even more threatening than what we face. Jesus' birth was in an extremely dangerous time and is accompanied by terrible tragedy. Yet, in the midst of such trouble, God protects Him.

The second chapter of Mtt., forms a microcosm of humanity around the birth of Christ where we see all these forces of good and evil played out with startling reality and power. The three principle characters are introduced in verse one: Jesus, King Herod, and the Magi. In them, we find a summary of our human condition.

1. In King Herod we see humanity under power of sin.
2. In the Magi we see humanity under power of grace, led by God.
3. And in Jesus we see humanity's provision, hope, and salvation.

The way Matthew presents this clearly demonstrates the conflict between the best and the worst, good and evil, light and darkness. Also, as we read, I want you to notice that after the introductory sentence to this chapter, we don't see the name Jesus again. He becomes "The Child," so named nine times. It emphasizes fragility and vulnerability. Jesus becomes a refugee, a fugitive, a most wanted person.

This is a great chapter, so well woven together, we'll read it in its entirety. To make it a bit more interesting, we'll be using different readers for the dialogue as noted in the bulletin.

### **HEROD: the ugliness of sin**

The chapter begins with, "...during the time of King Herod...." If you know much about King Herod, you realize this is a horrible time to be born. The emotional impact would be about like for us to think of being born in Nazi Germany under Hitler at his worst. In Herod is revealed power of sin in all horror and tragedy. Herod would do anything to retain his power, and he did some of the most despicable things in history. He was born into a politically well-connected family in 73 B.C.. His father was a king also. Herod's father was poisoned by political opponents. Perhaps something snapped inside Herod at that point— seeing how vulnerable political leaders could be. Seething with revenge, Herod formed an ingenious plan. He invited his father's killers over for a dinner party. (Apparently they didn't know that he knew they were the ones who killed his father). His greeters just happened to be hit men. After they all gathered and the doors were locked, at his command they slaughtered them all. His paranoia knew no end. People, soldiers by the tens of thousands murdered by him. All Herod needed was hint, or suspicion of disloyalty. He took no chances of a secret ingredient ending up in his soup. He murdered his favorite wife. Then he killed her mother. And, then another of his wives was killed by him. Three of his own sons were murdered by him. The last one as Herod was on his deathbed. Therefore, the Roman Emperor, Augustus commented, "It is safer to be Herod's pig than his son." This slaughter of the innocent male children under two years-old in Bethlehem is in perfect keeping with his character. Just the rumor of someone born to be king was enough to send his ruthless killing machine into motion. Herod deserves a place in history alongside Hitler, Stalin, Osama Bin Laden and other despotic leaders.

At the outset, Matthew is letting us know that the birth of Jesus means conflict. Herod heard the same Scriptures as the Magi. The Magi believed and worshiped. Herod suppressed the truth, rebelling against it. As a consequence he hurts himself and others. Rejecting The Christ Child leads to series of ugly acts to retain control. Lies, deception, and finally the slaughter of babies.

Here, the Gospel is suggesting, unless we let Jesus take over our lives, our lives will be unbelievably bad because of original sin. Unless Jesus is Lord, you will hurt people in your life and end up hurting yourself. In Herod, we see in full bloom the evil every unredeemed human heart is capable of. As an illustration of the peril, Herod died later, paranoid, demented— an awful, agonizing death. His stomach was so rotted with disease, and the stench he gave off so horrible, even his body guards had to be relieved at short intervals lest they collapse from the awful smell.

### **AT WAR WITH EVIL**

It has been popular in our day to blur the lines between good and evil. Of course there is some virtue in trying to see good in everyone. But, we must never forget we are in a pitched battle with evil on planet earth. This story of Jesus' birth brings it out. In fact the Bible is a chronicle of the struggle against evil. The good news is, we are assured God will eventually destroy evil.

Jesus came at Christmas to engage the powers of darkness and provide our deliverance from evil. In Herod the devil finds an ally to try and destroy God's plan. While evil must be resisted as best we can, the true answer to evil provided by God at Christmas is in transforming the hearts of people. This is a time for us to be bold about the true nature of Christ's coming and quit diluting any reference to Christ from our celebrations. What do we have to celebrate but Christ? Because of what He has done, salvation for all humanity has come through the power of God to change even the hardest, most evil hearts.

You may have read popular writer, newspaper humorist, Dave Berry writing about his son's school not having a Christmas program:

*To avoid offending anybody, the school dropped religion altogether and started singing about the weather. At my son's school, they now hold the winter program in February and sing increasingly non-memorable songs such as "Winter Wonderland," and "Frosty the Snowman" and— this is a real song— "Suzy Snowflake," all of which is pretty funny because we live in Miami. A visitor from another planet would assume that the children belonged to the Church of Meteorology.*

Christmas isn't about sentimental feelings, sweet memories and mushy feelings of goodwill. It is fully engaged with the real world. And in the midst of the ugliest evil, brings forth deliverance, new life, salvation.

### **MAGI: humanity under grace**

In contrast to Herod, Magi come to see the Christ-child with worship in their hearts. What a stark contrast to Herod who approaches the same event with murder in his heart. The Magi form a rather shocking story. They are walking illustrations of God's inclusiveness, sovereignty and grace. They are the ultimate outsiders. They are first of all Gentiles, probably from Persia (present day Iraq and Iran) or Arabia. Matthew's gospel is written to a Jewish audience— definitely the most Jewish of all Gospels. So this is a radical thought to Jews that the first worshipers he tells about are Gentiles. Matthew Immediately opens up Christ's coming to include

all people everywhere. Not only are they outsiders in terms of race, but also in terms of profession. "Magi" is just a transliteration of the Greek term used here. The KJV and RSV use "wise men." Actually it is a dilution of the term's meaning. Magi were a priestly caste which originated in Media, specializing in dreams, omens and astrology. They were revered in Persia as "wise men." But, they mixed philosophy and science with the mystical as most people of that day did. The word "magician" comes from "Magos" and is a possible translation of this word. Remember, Simon the Magos in Acts 8, a magician. At the root of this ancient system was the idea that humanity was in a symbiotic relationship with the heavens. It was a combination of astronomy and astrology. "Astro-nomy" comes from "nomos" for law. "Astro-logy" comes from "logos" for word or message. Evidently, through their observations of natural phenomena, God led these Magi to His Son.

Remember, in Israel, astrology was not tolerated, but strictly forbidden. And, it always has been out of bounds for God's people. These Magi were people who looked to the created rather than the Creator for guidance. Israel despised magicians and astrologers of the Gentile world as idolaters of the worst sort. Thus, in a powerful way, God is illustrating the "for-all-ness" of Christ's coming— even to Gentiles and even to the most despised of professions: magicians, astrologers, idolaters, Magos-man.

Yet, here wonderful insight is given in how God reveals himself to us. He begins where the Magi are, with what they observe in nature, a special star. It would seem the star was given mainly (only?) for their benefit, to lead them to Christ. But, nature has limitations in revealing and leading us to God. Their human knowledge and study leads them to Israel, and Jerusalem. But, only after they hear Scripture, receive its revelation that tells them the Messiah will be born in Bethlehem, does star re-appear. Psalm 19 says it best. It begins with praise of God's revelation in his creation, but ends with the praise of his revelation in Scripture. We cannot find Christ without God's Word.

Thus led, guided by this God who stoops to reach them where they are to lead them from the delusion of their ways to the truth in Jesus Christ, they arrive to where Jesus is, and worship him. Here, the revelation becomes miraculous in the star pointing to the very house. This Child is in very humble surroundings. He is not at the manger now, but notice he is now in a house. Perhaps this is sometime between a few months after Jesus' birth to less than two years-old (suggested by Herod's search for all under two). These Magi trusted God's leading. Then they gave gifts. "They opened their treasures...." Worship opens us up so we can give. Then, they returned home by another way. This is suggestive of the inward transformation enthroning Christ makes. Worship changes us, we cannot remain the same. Our way becomes new, different.

Matthew does something interesting here. Up to this point, Herod is called "King Herod." After the Magi worship Christ, simply Herod from then on— no more "king." The Magi's worship enthrones Jesus and dethrones Herod.

### **JESUS: The way of salvation**

We can stand in awe of the lowliness to which God stoops. The hope of the ages, not born into an idyllic, sheltered environment. He came under one of the most evil, worst kings imaginable. We may ask, "Why did the magi have to stop and inform Herod?" Perhaps it was to give him a chance to also worship. But, didn't God know he'd refuse, and this horrible carnage would result from his hardened heart? Apparently the opportunity had to be given. This is all part of the mystery of evil, salvation and humanity's free-will.

When we enter into the way of salvation by receiving Jesus, The Child, worshiping Him as our Lord, ruler we are born anew and embark on a brand new pilgrimage. We receive incredible gifts. But it is also true, we are at war with evil and all manifestations of darkness. There are new perils and dangers. Yet it is a journey where we have the supernatural help of God in protection and provision. Just as Joseph, Mary and Jesus are a step ahead of Herod and his evil plots. Certainly the flight to Egypt is disappointing, frightening, and inconvenient. But, also God has anticipated their need for financial help through the generous gifts of the Magi which probably supported them for that time of being refugees. In the process, it all, ends up fulfilling prophecy. Then, as they come back to Bethlehem, still fear for Jesus' life, so end up having to go to Nazareth. Obviously a forced move, not their first choice. But even that also serves to fulfill prophecy.

This all provides assurance for us in our lives in our shattered dreams and encounters with evil. In the midst of war and the conflict in our world between good and evil, we enjoy peace and life. Only the Prince of Peace who entered our world on Christmas is able to bring our divided hearts to rest. We are no longer living in rebellion to what we know is the truth. No longer is there that division between what we know is right and the way we're living. Jesus brings our conflicted hearts to rest— in His will is our peace.

### **CONCLUSION**

Here in this one chapter, we have a microcosm of our humanity and our world today:

- God in his grace and mercy drawing all to himself, as with the Magi, stooping to where we are, calling us to come, worship Jesus and find the way of salvation.
- We see our bondage to original sin illustrated in Herod and the horrible peril of our condition. The conflict is played out, who will be king? Jesus or us? The consequences of our refusal are seen in Herod's slaughter of the innocent children.
- The blessedness of acceptance is seen in the Magi, giving, joyful returning a new way with nothing ever being the same again.
- Jesus, "The Child," modeling the way of our salvation. Not denying the reality of evil, and tragedy. Yet, protected, and provided for in midst turmoil of this world's scene.

A number of years ago, *US News and World Report* had an article by Billy Graham that made a profound point. Billy Graham speaks of 1809 as being a year when the headlines were filled with forecasts of doom as Napoleon marched across Europe. But, the real shaping of history that year was in the births. He lists five world-shaping births in 1809: **William Gladstone**, one of the finest statesmen England ever produced. **Alfred Tennyson** was born to an obscure minister and

his wife, destined to have a profound effect on the literary world. **Oliver Wendell Holmes** was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The great composer, **Mendelssohn** was born in Germany. And, that same year, the cries of a newborn infant were heard from a rugged log cabin in Hardin County, KY. The baby's name? **Abraham Lincoln**.

Today, the destiny of our world continues to be shaped by THE BIRTH. Beyond the headlines evil keeps grabbing, God's salvation history is quietly taking place. We need a savior. Will you like the magi bow down and worship Jesus? Will you get the king out of your name and enthrone Him alone, as your King, Lord, and Savior? "Live" is God's word. The powers of darkness reverse ever seek to reverse things and turn "live" into "evil." "Live" spelled backwards becomes "evil." But God redeems evil, turns it around, inviting us to live.

Our closing hymn, #152– "I heard the Bells on Christmas Day," was written by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow out of his own personal conflict during the Civil War. Longfellow hated war as a destroyer of humanity and all he stood for. But he also hated slavery as much for the same reasons. Finally he concluded the North could not avoid war in the need for justice. But notice verses three and four, and how he moved from despair to hope, as he gets a view of the larger picture.