

## MATTHEW 2:16-18

### ATTACKING THE VULNERABLE

“Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah:

‘A voice was heard in Ramah,  
weeping and loud lamentation,  
Rachel weeping for her children;  
she refused to be comforted, because they are no more.’”<sup>1</sup>

**I**n the liturgical calendar, Epiphany is assigned to January 6. However, in the liturgical churches of the western world the observance is transferred to the Sunday nearest that date. Hence, on January 3, the Feast of Epiphany commemorates the visit of the magi. Epiphany is said to remind Christians that God’s salvation reached beyond the Jews. Isaiah prophesied that Messiah would be “a light for the Gentiles.” Moreover, He would bring “salvation to the ends of the earth” [ISAIAH 49:6], certainly as far as those very magi had traveled.

However, after the magi departed things turned unimaginably dark. Suddenly, we see that the Christmas story is more than the stylized Nativity scenes represented on Christmas cards. Joseph was warned in a dream to take the child and His mother and flee to Egypt where he was to remain until called by God to return [MATTHEW 2:13-15]. The dream must have occurred during the night following the magi’s visit. Likely, Joseph and his family left hurriedly the very next morning. Having few goods with them, they would have been unimpeded in their departure.

Herod was a master in the art of assassination. Upon coming to the throne, he annihilated the Sanhedrin.<sup>2</sup> Later, he slaughtered three hundred court officers out of hand.<sup>3</sup> Later still, he murdered his wife Mariamne and her mother Alexandra together with his eldest son Antipater.<sup>4</sup> Josephus also tells how Herod then murdered two other sons—Alexander and Aristobulus—because he imagined that they threatened his power.<sup>5</sup> A pun attributed to the emperor Augustus, alluding to the Jewish avoidance of pork, noted that “it is better to be Herod’s swine (*hus*) than Herod’s son (*huíos*)!” In the hour of his death, in March, 4 BC, this cruel monarch arranged for the slaughter of the notable men of Jerusalem because he wanted to ensure that people mourned his passing. Salome, his sister, countermanded this diabolical plan, however.

In the painting “The Slaughter of the Innocents,” baroque artist Peter Paul Rubens attempted to depict the horror—a soldier smashing a child against a Roman column, another lancing a mother who tries to hide her babe. The painting also shows a woman weeping over the body of her dead infant. It’s a scene from the Bible none of us enjoy imagining. In describing the atrocity, the Evangelist Matthew quoted the Prophet Jeremiah.

---

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible, English Standard Version**, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. <sup>2</sup> Flavius Josephus, **The Works of Josephus: Antiquities: xvii: 42-44, 167**; Translated by William Whiston (Hendrickson, Peabody, MA 1996)

<sup>3</sup> Josephus, **Antiquities: xvi: 392-394**

<sup>4</sup> Josephus, **Antiquities: xvii: 182-187, 191**

<sup>5</sup> Josephus, **Antiquities: xvi: 392-394**

Early Christians, to whom Levi geared His account of the Master's life, were almost exclusively Jewish. Raised as Jews and thoroughly versed in Jewish tradition and familiar with the Scriptures, they would have known that Ramah was where Rachel died in the throes of childbirth before reaching the Promised Land [GENESIS 35:16-21; 48:7]. They also would have associated Ramah with the deportation of the Jews during the exile. In that vicinity, the Babylonians ripped Israel's children from their mother's arms in order to carry them into slavery. Thus, Jeremiah's prophecy pointed forward to the deep sorrow Jewish mothers would experience and pointed farther forward yet to the sorrow that would attend the birth of the Messiah.

That evocative solo of Rachel weeping would have called forth the agony, the despair, and the tortured "Why," of grieving parents points to the child who would be "a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief" [ISAIAH 53:3]. Thinking about this aspect of the Christmas story, we are reminded that Christmas isn't the saccharine story we've created in the popular consciousness. Satan unleashed a vicious counterattack [see REVELATION 12:4b].

Satan's assault attacked life at its most vulnerable stage. The very first assault by the devil after the birth of Christ was against society's weakest members—infants; he attacked the "least of these." Even today, the enemy's mode of attack hasn't changed much. We are painfully aware of the ongoing slaughter of the unborn, the devaluation of the elderly, the vulnerability of the poor, the disabled and the prisoner.

Though we are Christians, and though we sometimes feel helpless in the face of the unrelenting assault against life perpetuated by a self-centred society, we are on the side of right. Though our Faith proscribes us from employing violence against violent people, we do have powerful weapons at our disposal—righteousness, prayer and truth. It is time that the people of God stood athwart the path of evil that seeks to destroy life even as the culture about us advances individual self-interest ahead of personal responsibility.

This third Sunday of January is a day set aside to commemorate the Sanctity of Life. Throughout North America, churches observe this day, using it as an opportunity to instruct congregants in truths that are well nigh universally disregarded in this day. It provides opportunity to remind churchgoers of the value of life—all life—and to instruct worshippers in righteousness that leads us to resist succumbing to the prevailing evil mindset within society. The message this morning examines that dark day when Herod, enraged at the thought that his grip on power was threatened by the birth of a baby, order the slaughter of all male infants two years of age and under. Join me in exploring these few verses from the opening pages of Matthew's Gospel.

**MOTIVE FOR THE ATTACK** — In the text, we have a bare-bone account of Herod's actions. "Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men." Nevertheless, the text does suggest some insight into the motives behind his despicable action.

Let's go back in our memories to the events that unfolded as the magi arrived in Jerusalem. The evangelist relates the story. "After Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, 'Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.' When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:

““And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for from you shall come a ruler  
who will shepherd my people Israel.””

“Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, ‘Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.’ After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way” [MATTHEW 2:1-12].

The first indication of a problem is provided in verse 3, when we read that Herod was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. The news of the birth of a child caused the king mental anguish. And when the king was disturbed, you may be assured that the entire city was disturbed with him. So, Herod devised a dastardly plan. He would use the magi’s desire to honour the infant king to find the child; then he would kill Him because he saw Him as a threat to his power.

However, God intervened. The magi were warned in a dream not to return to Herod. Whether each of the magi dreamed similar dreams, or whether one dreamed and warned the others, the result was the same. The magi left for their own country, travelling by another route that would avoid Jerusalem.

God does not inform us how long it was before Herod realised that he was tricked, but since Bethlehem was only about ten kilometres from Jerusalem, it could not have been more than a day or two. The trickster was tricked, and in a fury, he ordered the slaughter of all male children two years of age or less. His officials hastened to carry out the order, and so the infants in the environs of Bethlehem were murdered. Likely there were no more than twenty infants killed, given the population of the region. Nevertheless, it was a tragedy unprecedented in that ancient world. No one would attack and kill the most vulnerable members of society.

Why did Herod order this dreadful deed? What could motivate such a wicked, shameful act? The answer appears to lie in the fact that he was utterly focused on his own interest to the exclusion of any consideration for others. The king’s personal comfort, his personal position, superseded all other interests. In theological terms, the king had placed himself at the centre of his life—he was firmly seated on the throne of his life. That he was furious exposes the fact that he sought to fulfil his own desire, whatever the cost. When it appeared that he was thwarted, he flew into a rage, expressing his fury through senseless slaughter.

May I remind you that the essence of sin is the exaltation of self. When our first mother promoted her own desire over the revealed will of the Creator, she permitted herself to be deceived. When the serpent questioned the will of God, Eve “saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise” [GENESIS 3:6]. Thus misled—betrayed by her own desire—she sought to gain approval for her rebellion from the man for whom the Lord God had created her. Adam willingly accepted her invitation to rebellion, choosing to side with her in opposing the will of God. In their mad pursuit of self-fulfilment, they plunged the race into ruin and destruction.

Herod exemplified the selfsame character that increasingly marks contemporary society. On the whole, ours is a society without restraint, a culture that defines what is good by the fleeting sense of happiness that comes from getting one's own way. Modern people—too often including the professed people of God—are concerned only for their own interests, never comprehending that when we get our own way we do so at the expense of dishonouring God. Consider the condition marking modern culture. The experts told us that we were lacking in self-esteem. They informed us that we must not deny ourselves anything that we wanted. In order to ensure that we could have whatever we desired, they created easy credit, urging everyone to get what they wanted now. Thus, we bought cars and trucks, bigger houses with an array of furnishings and appliances that would make our parent's heads spin.

So, we listened to the voice of the experts. We acquired things and redefined character by what we possessed. We exalted those who had the most "things," believing that their acquisition proved them superior in intellect and ability; we adulated them and promoted them to the highest positions in the land. We spent and we accumulated until our houses became shrines to consumerism. We told ourselves we were living the good life; we thought we had it made.

Solomon described the modern condition when he wrote:

"I did not restrain myself from getting whatever I wanted;  
I did not deny myself anything that would bring me pleasure.  
So all my accomplishments gave me joy;  
this was my reward for all my effort.  
Yet when I reflected on everything I had accomplished  
and on all the effort that I had expended to accomplish it,  
I concluded: 'All these achievements and possessions are ultimately profitless—  
like chasing the wind!  
There is nothing gained from them on earth.'"

[ECCLESIASTES 2:10, 11]<sup>6</sup>

Our pursuit of wealth was but a symptom of a deeper malady; it revealed that we were placing ourselves on the throne of our own lives. "Our children will have it better than we did," we told ourselves. We had been deprived, we told ourselves. So, we told our children that they were smarter than any generation before them. We told them that they were able to make every decision without reference to the wisdom of prior generations. We ceased worrying whether they could read or write and no longer concerned ourselves with teaching them to add and subtract; what mattered was that they felt good about themselves.

We entrusted our children to teachers who taught them that there were no consequences for their choices. We told them that the morals of past generations were meaningless—what mattered was that they feel good about themselves. We said they could not restrain themselves, and since they can't help themselves, our sole concern was that they "protect" themselves. So long as they had a condom and used it, all would be well.

What is the situation today? Teen morality is abysmal. Parents are incapable of resisting the demands of their children. We use television and computer games as baby-sitters rather than teaching our children to exercise their imagination and learning to enjoy all that God created. Consequently, we witness a generation plagued with poor health and the inability to provide for themselves in the manner to which they would like to become accustomed.

---

<sup>6</sup> The NET Bible First Edition (Biblical Studies Press, 2006)

We taught our youth that they could gratify every sexual desire without consequence. The ready availability of the pill would ensure that no one need get pregnant, and if there was a failure, we would make other arrangements. Now, we have a higher incidence of teen pregnancy than ever before in the history of the western world and any youth who holds to a high moral standard is ridiculed and browbeat until they succumb to the plea to be like everyone else. Single mothers are common among young people who have no ability to provide for themselves. Nevertheless, they feel good about themselves despite their inability to care for their own needs.

However, our culture is not concerned. We chose to fix the problem of teen pregnancy by killing our unborn children and grandchildren. Courts found doctrines of privacy that justified murdering our infants; learned jurists formulated legal doctrines of “penumbras, formed by emanations” within the founding documents of the nation, all of which led to the doctrine of privacy that has become the sacred law of western nations. We invented great mottos to justify gratifying our own desires: “Every child a wanted child” and “No more back alley abortions.”

However, as we murdered increasing numbers of the unborn, we could not deny the emotion toll on the women who permitted the murder of their children and on the men who no longer fulfilled the role of protectors within society. So, we redefined the meaning of words. The child was no longer a person, but a foetus or the “product of conceptus.” We no longer murdered the unborn, but gave women freedom to choose.

Isn't it true that we have exalted self above the Living God? Isn't it evident that even among the assemblies of the Lord we are more concerned with our own personal comfort than we are with hearing the strong Word of the Lord? Isn't it true that we would rather ignore the sins of our children than hold them accountable before the Lord? And isn't it true that we are more concerned that we not disturb the government than we are that we should speak the truth in love? All these evidences point to the sobering fact that we have largely capitulated to evil, choosing personal comfort rather than truth and boldness in the cause of the Master.

**CONSEQUENCES OF THE ATTACK** — There was great sorrow throughout the nation as knowledge concerning Herod's ruthless assault against the innocent became known. Thus, Matthew appeals to the words of Jeremiah in testifying to the lamentation in the land. Herod recognised that not only was he ordering the murder of infants, but he was intent on murdering the Messiah. He had acknowledged as much when he asked where the Christ was to be born [MATTHEW 2:4]. Thus, his culpability is made greater still by this frontal assault against the will of God. However, our culture is just as culpable of grave sin against the Creator of life because we despise the gift of God.

We read the words of the Psalmist, but one can only wonder if we believe they are true.

“Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD,  
the fruit of the womb a reward.  
Like arrows in the hand of a warrior  
are the children of one's youth.  
Blessed is the man  
who fills his quiver with them!  
He shall not be put to shame  
when he speaks with his enemies in the gate.”

[PSALM 127:3-5]

If children are the LORD's heritage and if they are His reward, then shouldn't we rejoice in large families instead of making cutting remarks to parents who are so blessed? If the man with a full quiver of children is blessed, then shouldn't we encourage our children to marry and to raise godly offspring? Instead, we ask inane questions when a woman announces she is expecting a child. "Did you mean for this to happen?" "Was this planned?" We are uncertain whether we should rejoice at the announcement of pregnancy or whether we should be silent. It is a reflection of the fact that we have been co-opted by society that we equivocate on this issue.

Perhaps you recall how David weighed God's workmanship as he considered his own birth. He wrote:

"You formed my inward parts;  
you knitted me together in my mother's womb.  
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.  
Wonderful are your works;  
my soul knows it very well.  
My frame was not hidden from you,  
when I was being made in secret,  
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.  
Your eyes saw my unformed substance;  
in your book were written, every one of them,  
the days that were formed for me,  
when as yet there was none of them."

[PSALM 139:13-16]

Each child is precious; and the life of all people—including the aged, is precious. God says that "the ransom price for a human life is too high" [SEE PSALM 49:7, 8].<sup>7</sup> Life is precious, as God states when He says that He has carried His people from the womb; then He says:

"Even to your old age I am he,  
and to gray hairs I will carry you.  
I have made, and I will bear;  
I will carry and will save."

[ISAIAH 46:3, 4]

Thus, we are convinced that it is God who gives life—not man. Because it is God who gives life, we sin grievously when we take life or fail to protect the vulnerable among us. When we disrespect life at any stage, we sin against the True and Living God. When we exalt our own personal comfort and our own sinful desire over the will of God in giving life, we act in defiance of Him who shall ultimately call us to account.

As Hosea said so many years ago, our culture now "sow[s] the wind," and thus, we shall "reap the whirlwind" [HOSEA 8:7]. It is a tragic truth that "Whatever one sows, that will he also reap" [GALATIANS 6:7b]. We have pursued our own desires and trained our children to never deny themselves anything; consequently, the western world teeters on the edge of financial ruin as oriental lenders are poised to demand that their loans be repaid with the interest. Our children will become their slaves because of our own refusal to deny ourselves.

---

<sup>7</sup> NET Bible, op. cit.

When it comes—and it shall come, for “God is not mocked” [GALATIANS 6:7a]—we will be shocked at the suddenness of the accounting that will be demanded. It is an axiom of righteousness that “The one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption” [GALATIANS 8:8a]. Because we taught our children to never deny themselves, they will shortly realise that the cost for health care, purchased with borrowed moneys, must rise to excessive amounts by a rapidly ageing populace. Thus, death panels, as predicted by a prominent candidate for public office in the United States, will soon become a very real fixture on the national scene. This will be done in a manner that characterises the despicable action as compassionate, much as National Socialism in Germany during the Weimar Republic euthanized “useless eaters” in the name of compassion for the herrenvolk.

There are always consequences to our choices. When we choose to live godly lives, we anticipate the blessing of God. As Solomon has stated:

“When a man’s ways please the LORD,  
he makes even his enemies to be at peace with him.”

[PROVERBS 16:7]

By the same token, the Wise Man warned:

“He who is often reproved, yet stiffens his neck,  
will suddenly be broken beyond healing.”

[PROVERBS 29:1]

God will not forever ignore sin in a society. He will not overlook sin that is tolerated by His people, but He will Himself judge wickedness. He warned ancient Israel, just as He cautions us:

“The LORD looks down from heaven;  
he sees all the children of man;  
from where he sits enthroned he looks out  
on all the inhabitants of the earth,  
he who fashions the hearts of them all  
and observes all their deeds.  
The king is not saved by his great army;  
a warrior is not delivered by his great strength.  
The warhorse is a false hope for salvation,  
and by its great might it cannot rescue.  
“Behold, the eye of the LORD is on those who fear him,  
on those who hope in his steadfast love,  
that he may deliver their soul from death  
and keep them alive in famine.”

[PSALM 33:13-19]

Just so, the sins of the nation will be visited upon the people. If we are silent concerning the wickedness of the nation, we will receive the same judgement—we cannot escape. If we mourn the loss of righteousness and the slaughter of the vulnerable, we align ourselves with God.

**A SPIRITUAL PERSPECTIVE** — Make no mistake, Satan motivated this attack in an effort to destroy God’s Anointed One. However, Satan’s incitement does not excuse Herod anymore than Judas gets a pass because Satan entered him [LUKE 22:3; JOHN 13:27]. During His High Priestly prayer, the Master identified Judas as “the son of destruction” [JOHN 17:12]. Thus, one may be energised by the devil, even under satanic control, and yet that one is responsible for his own actions. Therefore, we must assign to Herod the responsibility for what he did. In the same way, when people in contemporary society choose to push their own comfort before responsibility, they must accept responsibility for the choices they have made.

Versed as they were in the Scriptures, I must believe that those grieving parents whose children were stripped from them and destroyed recalled the remainder of Jeremiah’s prophesy.

“Thus says the LORD:  
‘Keep your voice from weeping,  
and your eyes from tears,  
for there is a reward for your work,  
declares the LORD,  
and they shall come back from the land of the enemy.  
There is hope for your future,  
declares the LORD.’”

[JEREMIAH 31:16, 17]

They would weep for sorrow, but they could be confident in the Lord’s goodness. Though evil appeared to triumph momentarily, God would succeed in His design. We need to maintain perspective, knowing that nothing happens in this world that escapes the notice of the Living God. Recall that the Master has said, “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows” [MATTHEW 10:28-30].

That divine truth should comfort and encourage the people of God to this day. The Poet has rightly observed:

Truth forever on the scaffold, Wrong forever on the throne—  
Yet that scaffold sways the future, and behind the dim unknown,  
Standeth God within the shadow, keeping watch above His own.<sup>8</sup>

Though for a moment evil appears to be succeeding, ultimately it is doomed to fail. No lie can live forever; and it is a lie that personal comfort trumps life. Whether in the womb or on the bed of the elderly, life is precious in the sight of God. Truth crushed to the ground shall rise again; and when we imagine that the pursuit of convenience permits us to rid ourselves of the elderly, the vulnerable, the sick or the unborn, we err. Though wicked men distort the truth and seem to drive justice from the field, we know that ultimately truth shall prevail. God lives, and He is righteous. Let me choose to align my life with what is right and what is noble and what is good rather than what is convenient and with what is comfortable and what is opposed to God.

---

<sup>8</sup> James Russell Lowell, “The Present Crisis,” **Poems of James Russell Lowell**, Great Literature Online (<http://www.classicauthors.net/Lowell/PoemsOfJamesRussellLowell/>) accessed 16 January, 2010



You cannot truly align your life with what is good and noble if you have no living relationship to God who is truth. The purpose of our preaching is to glorify His Name through bringing many souls to life through faith in God's Beloved Son. The Son of God took on human form so that He might give His life as a sacrifice because of sinful man. Crucified and buried, He rose from the dead on the third day. Now, God calls on all people to believe this truth.

The Word of God invites all who are willing with these gracious words. "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Master,' believing in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved. With the heart one believes, resulting in a right standing with God, and with the mouth one confesses, resulting in salvation."<sup>9</sup> The message concludes with this gracious invitation: "Everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord will be saved" [**ROMANS 10:13**].

I pray you are a Christian. And if you are a Christian, I pray that you are standing firm against pursuing your own comfort, seeking rather to pursue truth and to seek what glorifies the Master. May God make you courageous in the face of growing evil. May God enable His people to stand as one to the praise of His glory. Amen.

---

<sup>9</sup> Author's translation of **ROMANS 10:9, 10**