

January 6, 2019
They Were Three of Thousands
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Matthew 2:1-18

2 *In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ² asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” ³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:*

*⁶ ‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.’”*

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸ Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” ⁹ When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹ On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

[The Escape to Egypt]

¹³ Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” ¹⁴ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, ¹⁵ and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, “Out of Egypt I have called my son.”

[The Massacre of the Infants]

¹⁶ When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. ¹⁷ Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

¹⁸ “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.”*

As genocides go, this wasn't much of one. In and around Bethlehem when Jesus was a toddler – twenty people probably; thirty at most. All of them little brown-skinned boys.

About sixty kids a year die of child abuse, just in Indiana. Well over a hundred in California. Around 3000 total, more or less. Nineteen kids are gunshot every day in the US; three of them die. That's 1100 more. Ironically, almost the same number of kids who died of war injuries in Syria in 2017. Globally, 3.1 million kids under age 5 starve to death, a number way down from 25 years ago. 85,000 kids dead in Yemen since the American-backed bombing began in 2015. 9.6 million more children are in near-constant danger there.

So maybe we can admit to ourselves and one another that our shock and grief at this god-awful story here in Matthew, chapter 2, is slightly put-on – amen? Jesus, Mary, and Joseph are but three of thousands – millions, really. Millions and millions of parents and children, terrorized and running for their very lives in the world right now.

Let's pray: *How to live, O God? How to live these privileged lives of ours, and faithfully call ourselves faithful? You are our heart's desire, and we are so easily overwhelmed by the suffering of this world. We pray to read the word with honest minds and brave hearts, to listen for THE word it might give us for our lives here and now – our time, our talent, our treasure, O God. Ease our grip on them; ease our want of them for ourselves, that others may be less afraid, that other children have a safe and happy life. Amen.*

Let's quickly go over the characters:

- Jesus, Mary, and Joseph you know well enough. Jewish peasants, poor as mice. Living under Roman occupation in first-century Palestine. Currently in Bethlehem following the birth of their first child, having come for the Roman-ordered census.

- Three kings. Magi. We only say three because there were three presents. Could have been two or twelve. “Kings” is an altogether wrong word. There is only one king in the story. The word “magi” is better, so long as we know it's short for “magician.” However, “sorcerer” or “fortune teller” is even better. But English won't use them – too jaded. They were Zoroastrian priests. Of another religion altogether, but one sharing some history with Judaism. A kind of interfaith, cultural exchange. I've attached a [commentary link to the sermon](#) so you can read about it if you want. Their god was also said to be born of a virgin and the religion foretold of other gods who would be as well – thus their interest in the rumors of one born in Judea.

- And Herod. This one is Herod the Great. “Tenuous” hardly describes his hold on the throne. He is not a legitimate king, and he knows it. Technically not Jewish enough to be king of Israel, and not appointed by Rome. He has neither a moral compass nor a spine. He lives in such perpetual terror of being deposed that he systematically assassinates his wives, his sons, and his advisors – pretty much anyone he remotely suspects of treason, including toddlers in a far district.

Herod has heard that foreigners have come to worship a newborn king within his borders. Using his own advisors to locate the birthplace, he orders a raid. By the time his butchers arrive, the foreigners are gone by another road, and Joseph has been warned in a dream to get out. He picks up his family and gets them to Egypt. And while it may have been for only twenty little boys, Matthew says the wailing from Bethlehem sounded like Rachel wailing in Ramah for all her children who would never ever be. Because, of course, there is no such thing as a little genocide. The death of any child is the death of an entire history of people who will never, ever be.

I've another text for you this morning, written last week by my friend Christie Popp. She is an immigration lawyer and faithful member of Beth Shalom next door. She spoke here last year about the current immigration crisis. She wrote this last week while in Tijuana, volunteering with refugees stalled there. What is happening in Tijuana:

- Let's start with the list. To cross the border, you have to get a number on the list. This list is not maintained by the US government or any government. But every morning, people show up to see if their number is called. Right now, they are calling numbers in the low 14000, and signing up people close to 19000. On most days, around 30 people are called. Knowing this, most people don't come until it's close to their number. However, for some reason, yesterday, they called over 250 people. And most weren't there. It is unclear what will happen today. Will they get a second chance? Or will they have to get a new number? If that's the case, they will be looking at another 5 months of waiting. So there are thousands of people who cannot go home, who need to apply for asylum, and who are stuck. Some have found work, but most are living in a mix of encampments, hotels, and shelters. They are hungry. Many have spent thousands of dollars to get here and are running out of money.
- Al Otro Lado, the main organization down there, is running outreach at the various places people live, and also at their principal location. Yesterday, in the morning, the first thing I had to do was interpret in French at the border. (Very Rusty French). But I was able to tell a group of African men where and when to come receive additional services Then I spent the day preparing people for their asylum interviews (called a credible or reasonable fear interview). That meant also telling them that what waited on the other side was first several days to several weeks in the ice box, followed by potentially being separated from their children. And months of detention in a jail. Then I had to review their claim for asylum and provide them advice on their claim.

In the location where I was stationed we helped 45 families and individuals from 11 countries.

- The individuals we spoke to were not just from Central America. They were from all over, including several African countries and Russia. Other sites helped even more people. Yet the fact is that many of these asylum seekers will still be waiting for a very long time. I didn't take photos because their fear is real. Today, there is facial recognition software and photos online or in the media can really put these people in danger. Already, some have been found by their pursuers as they wait. Yesterday, I spoke with a Mexican man who is still stuck in Mexico as his persecutors search for him. He has heard that they know he is in Tijuana. He knows it won't be long until he is found. And yet his number begins with 17. That means a very long wait before the US government will even consider letting him pass. He will probably be dead before his number is called.
- Of particular concern are youth traveling alone and LGBTQ asylum seekers. The US government has specific requirements for unaccompanied youth. They have to let them in and care for them. So the solution? They won't let them get close. The government has worked out a deal with the Mexican police and if the police find out a young person is in Mexico alone, that child gets sent back home "for his safety." They are sending children back to the place they fled. All we can do is advise youth to avoid going out on the streets and stay away from the border. If they show up for their number, then the police will get called. They won't even make it in line. These kids are in serious danger in Tijuana. You probably read about a couple who were lured out of their shelter. They were tortured and murdered. And there is nothing we could do for them except to say that they can't cross now because the US government has ensured that they cannot cross.
- Some of the people we saw yesterday were starving. Others needed medicine. But so many have run out of money. Since everything is volunteer run, the ability of volunteer organizations to feed people depends entirely on their resources. I know that not everyone at the border has a viable asylum claim under our laws. But everyone I spoke to did, including one man whose body has been permanently disfigured from a machete attack. I cannot describe the need in Tijuana right now. It is so much worse than you would imagine from reading the news stories.
- What our government has done is nothing short of a crime against humanity. It's horrible. Please, write any government official you can think of. Please share this post.

She goes on to share [ways to give money and volunteer](#).

Friends, it's no more fun to read this than it is to hear it. But it matters. It matters hugely to read the scripture in the context of the world we live in. Guatemala, Columbia and

Honduras are ALL more than 2000 miles from Tijuana. Russia is 5000. The Congo is 9000. Jesus, Joseph, and Mary had it easy compared to them. It's only 430 miles from Bethlehem to Egypt, the same as from here to Memphis. Google maps says it would take five days and ten hours to walk from Bloomington to Memphis and require one ferry ride.

But what difference does it make to compare? Ours is to figure what the text has to do with faith for us here and now, with any of us who claim faith in Jesus in this time and place. The text makes plain that in choosing incarnation as the vehicle of salvation, Jesus chose incarnation NOT among the privileged and protected, but among the lowly and the terrorized.

To ignore the suffering and injustice of the people Jesus most embodied – well, that's heresy, isn't it? At best it's idolatry. Flexing a self-indulgent faith to worship a made up god who asks nothing we do not want to give. Again, again, again, Friends, grace is free for everyone. Once. And. For. All. But stepping up to discipleship, we are no longer the ALL. We count ourselves as his. His followers. His servants. His disciples. His church. He is Friend-Teacher-Father-Lord of us. And our Friend-Teacher-Father-Lord has not kept secret what he wants from us.

He wants everything. Remember the rich young ruler? He wants everything. And we've re-written that story so that the young man keeps his fortune and follows Jesus after all. The church loves the Magi – *Epiphany* we call it – when the gospel is given to the Gentiles. But when we linger there too long it becomes easy-peasy to miss Baby Jesus doing what grown-up Jesus always does: situate the gospel in and among the least, the last, and the littlest; the frail, the forgotten, and the fearful; the terrorized, the tyrannized, the traumatized; the confounded, the coerced, the conquered; the bullied, the beaten, the broke, the babies; the harassed and the hounded and the hated; the ones who are so, so, so easy for people like us to never lose a wink of sleep about.

The fortune tellers left their gifts and escaped Herod by another road, Matthew says. In doing so, they did what? They financed Joseph's flight to Egypt, the undocumented years there. Friends, if we are the gentiles gathered around Baby Jesus' playpen, then I believe that, by default and by design, we are also his ally with every refugee father bribing his way across some border now; with every endangered, starving child. Not because we agree with the politics involved, but because that's where Jesus chose to be, and he called us to follow him.

We cannot do for them what Jesus did. But neither can anyone else do what Jesus has called you and me to do. No one but you governs the time, talent, and treasure in your care. Nor me and mine. God help us if we sit too easily with it, unchanged by the truth we know. God break us into people more generous and glad to serve this world than we've ever been before. Would you pray with me?