**Christmas Beyond the Stable**

**‘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.”’**

 **Matthew 2:13**

 I saw a Christmas tree on the roadside earlier this week. It had been stripped bare of lights and ornaments and discarded from its place of honor inside the home. There it lay, just three days after Christmas, waiting for the garbage truck to come carry it off. Maybe the occupants were going away. Maybe they bought it too soon. Or maybe they just grew tired of it. Whatever the care, there it was, cast unceremoniously by the roadside. I thought myself “**No – this is too soon! Christmas isn’t finished yet!”** Nevertheless, they’d packed up and moved on.

 And they’re not the only ones! As we read today’s passage from Matthew chapter 2, it’s clear Matthew has moved on too. We may prefer to linger upon that sentimental scene of cattle lowing, star shining, child cooing, Mary adoring, angels singing, shepherd kneeling and kings gifting, but Matthew pushes past all that. Why? Why such haste to move on from Christmas?

 And Matthew’s answer may shock you - politics. You see, this birth, sweet as it is, has political ramification... the coming of the Messiah poses credible threat to Herod. You’ll remember that when the wise men entered Judea following the star, they went to Herod for directions**. ‘Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?’** This question struck fear in Herod’s heart because it meant there was competition for the throne. So, he summoned his chief priests and scribes and they said the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem. So, Herod sent them on their way with this new information, asking that they report back after they’d found the child so he could go worship him too. They agreed but later they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod. S0, when their visit was complete, they left Bethlehem and went home another way, bypassing Jerusalem and Herod altogether.

 Now, when Herod learned that the wisemen had sidestepped him, he was furious. They had stolen away his opportunity to exterminate this treat to the throne. He needed their intel. Or did he? That’s when Herod did the unthinkable - he sent his army to Bethlehem to kill off every male child, aged two and under. Genocide is a dirty word but it’s an effective practice. So, weeping and wailing filled the streets of Bethlehem... Rachel weeping for her children.

 Who is this Herod fellow? Herod the Great ruled Judea from 37 – 4 BCE. His father was an Edomite who converted to Judaism which likely means Herod also was Jewish. But you’d never know if by the way he treated the Jews! He remained fiercely supportive of Rome and he ruled with an iron fist. He even killed off one of his power-hungry sons and terminated his own wife! Julius Caesar reportedly once joked that he would rather be one of Herod’s pigs than one of his sons. Herod was obsessed about his personal safety. He had private fortresses built for himself in Jerusalem, Sebastes, Caesarea, Machairs, Her odium and Masada. He was a bit of an egotist too. Prior to his own death, he arranged to have all the political prisoners killed at the time of his death so that there would be mourning and wailing heard throughout the land when he was gone. So, while there is no historic evidence of his slaughter of children in Bethlehem, such an act is consistent with his character.

 Herod was a dictator, and like many dictators, he was not afraid to use violence to maintain control. Military crackdowns, wiretapping, drone surveillance, night-time arrests, detainments, black ops, torture, imprisonment, death – these are the tools at any government’s disposal but it’s the ‘Herods’ of this world who have no qualms using them! Power and security at all cost.

But it’s not the way of this new King, is it? This new king comes to dismantle stone by stone the violent kingdom of Herod and does so without ever firing a single shot or arming a single soldier. The kingdom of God is the antithesis of Herod’s kingdom. No wonder Herod is troubled. No wonder he’s out to destroy Jesus before he can preach a word about this new kingdom... the kingdom of God.

Herod isn’t right about many things, but one thing he does have right - the Messiah comes to bring God’s salvation, and salvation isn’t just personal, it’s political too. God’s truth will bring change and dictators don’t like change, they want to maintain the status quo. But God’s kingdom will not be thwarted by any dictator, any political assembly, any Herod. God’s truth is marching on.

Oh, Herod tries his darndest - he unleashes his diabolical plan to kill all the baby boys in Bethlehem... but he’s too late. An angel has already warned Joseph in a dream and they escape into the night and head for Egypt! The child is safe, by God! And it isn’t long before, God calls ‘Herod the Great’ home to his reward. (May he rest in pieces.) After that happens, an angel appears to Joseph in a dream and tells him its safe now to return back home. On their way home however, Joseph learns that Herod’s evil son, Archelaus, has taken over for his father, so he’s hesitant to return to Bethlehem. Joseph receives another dream that confirms his concern, and he’s guided to go north to Galilee instead. And the Holy Family finally settles down for good in the city of Nazareth. So, while Luke’s Gospel explains how Mary and Joseph went from Nazareth to Bethlehem, Matthew’s Gospel explains how they went from Bethlehem to Nazareth.

And really, it’s all part of the Christmas story. Granted, we don’t include Herod in our Christmas pageant each year, not because he doesn’t belong, but because we’d have to change the rating from G (General public) to R (Restricted). It’s too violent. So, Luke provides the child-friendly version of Christmas and Matthew the adult version.

So, Matthew’s story puts the spotlight on the refugee issue and we’d be remiss not to speak of it because the issue is still very prevalent today. Refugees are people who leave their homeland not because they want to, but because they must. There personal safety is in jeopardy. And sadly, the refugee crisis is growing in our present day. There are now more than 70 million refugees in the world today – about double what there was just 20 years ago. The issues causing this?

The decade-long civil war in Syria has displaced several million people, most traveling north for refuge. Economic collapse in Venezuela has driven about 4 million people from that country. Gang violence in Central America is pushing families north to seek refuge in Mexico, USA and even Canada. Decades of drought and conflict in Somalia has created huge refugee camps in Africa.

My former church welcomed in a small African congregation made up of refugees from Sudan, Congo, Kenya and elsewhere. They had two pastors because they spoke two different languages. We invited one of the pastors to tell the story of how he ended up in Newport News. He talked about running for days with just the clothes on his back to avoid being killed. He finally ended up in a refugee camp and was selected to come to the USA. He’s one of the lucky one. About 26 million others call a refugee camp their home. For most there is no hope of ever moving.

We need to remember that our Lord began his life as a refugee. Through this act, he identifies with those who have been displaced in our world. This crisis is very real and all countries need to be doing more to alleviate the problem, including standing up to the evils that create the crisis.

There are still Herods to contend with today, certainly, but their lies cannot stand before God’s truth, their violence cannot diminish God’s purpose, their hate cannot overpower God’s love. Christ’s kingdom is advancing and nobody can stop it from coming. We see signs of its coming even in this age… the Berlin Wall has come crashing down. Apartheid in South Africa has been outlawed and blacks and whites have equal opportunity to education, employment and residence. And God has called home a whole host of dictators who the world is far better off without. Ferdinand Marcos, Saddam Hussein, Augusto Pinochet, Slobodan Milosevic, IA tola Khomeini, and Robert Mugabe just to name a few. , And the day is coming when every knee shall bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess the ultimate truth - that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God.

So, go into the new year with confidence… advocates of justice and agents of righteousness. God’s kingdom is coming and is closer now that ever. God’s truth has been born into the world in Jesus Christ and nothing can stand in its way. His kingdom is inevitable and his truth is marching on.

 Amen