

Outfoxing the King

Matthew 2:13-23

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With this story we have left behind what most people think of as Christmas. Gone are the cuddly sheep, the placid cows, the joyful angels, and the humble shepherds. In this story, joy and delight have given way to brutality and terror.

For most North Americans, Christmas is over now except for a few lingering holiday decorations to put away. For many people Christmas 2013 is fading from memory. But we who follow Jesus know that Christmas is not over just yet because the story is not quite finished. There is still more to tell about what happened. Specifically, there is this story of terror and brutality to tell. It's not a story we really want to tell since it reminds us that the forces of violence are still very much at work in the world. Yet that is exactly why we must tell this story: it illustrates God's response to terrible violence and powerful brutality.

This particular story begins with a paranoid King Herod. He has heard from the magi that another king has been born in his kingdom. This news troubles Herod because he thinks that any new king, even an infant, threatens his power. Since hearing this news from the magi, two years have passed (v. 16). During those two years, Herod has heard nothing more about the new king from Bethlehem. His intelligence network reports no fresh news and his original sources of information, the magi, have disappeared without a trace. After two years of watching and waiting for more information about the baby king, Herod's fears are turning into paranoia. Somewhere out there is a child threatening his kingdom, and Herod obsesses over how to get rid of him.

Herod was a complex man. Racially, he was an Arab. His father came from an Arab tribe in Idumea, while his mother came from Petra, the capital of the Arab kingdom of Nabatea.

Religiously, Herod was a Jew, perhaps not a very conscientious Jew, but a Jew nevertheless.

Culturally, Herod was Greek. His first language was Greek and several times he unsuccessfully tried to turn Jerusalem into a Greek city.

Politically, Herod was Roman. He fawned at his Roman overlords whenever he could and ruled his kingdom only because the Roman emperor explicitly authorized Herod to do so.¹

This odd mix of Arab, Jew, Greek, and Roman made Herod both complex and volatile.

He was also exceedingly violent. He fought at least 10 wars as the general of his army. Aside from war, he acted brutally toward his own family. He ordered two of his sons to be strangled after suspecting they were plotting against him. When he thought his favorite wife Mariamne was turning disloyal, he killed too. As if all of this were not enough, he beat his own servants.²

True to his pattern of using violence to stay in power, Herod turns to violence once again in Matthew 2. He's waited two years for news about the kingly threat out of Bethlehem, and he will wait no longer. He sends a detachment of soldiers to Bethlehem. Their orders are to massacre all children, both boys and girls, under the age of two. Since neither Herod nor his soldiers know the identity of the child born to be king, Herod simply has all of the one and two year olds

¹ Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IVP Academic, 2008), 56.

² Bailey, 57.

killed. Given the size of Bethlehem, one commentator estimates this might have been as many as 20 children.³

The story does not dwell on the gory details, so we won't either. It only says there was weeping and loud lamentation as parents and villagers mourned the deaths of their beautiful, beloved children.

Perhaps Herod thought he successfully eliminated the threat to his power. When his soldiers returned to Jerusalem they pronounced the mission accomplished. "Yes, King, we killed all the infants up to 2 years old. Bethlehem has no more children that age. Your throne is safe."

But Herod and his soldiers do not know God has already outfoxed them. Before the soldiers arrived, God hustled Jesus, Mary, and Joseph out of town under cover of darkness and whisked them down to Egypt for safety. It's doubtful that Herod ever found out God fooled him. The man likely went to his grave still believing he snuffed out the life of his infant rival. But of course Herod was wrong. The new king was very much alive.

People in our time often have trouble with this story. Modern North Americans frequently ask why God did not save the other infants in Bethlehem. Since God obviously saved Jesus from the swords and daggers, why didn't God also save those other infants?

We could ask the same question about many stories in the Bible. God saved the Hebrew slaves in Egypt, but why didn't God act to save all slaves in the ancient world, or slaves in the American South, or other slaves in the world's long history? During his adult life, Jesus healed some lepers, fixed some lame people so they

³ R. Alan Culpepper, "Exegetical Perspective on Matthew 2:13-23," in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 167.

could walk again, and fed some hungry people. But why didn't he heal all the lepers, fix all the lame folks, and feed every hungry person who was then alive?

This kind of question bugs us because for the last hundred years people in our culture have emphasized social fairness and personal rights. First in the women's suffrage movement, then in the Civil Rights movement and in feminism, our impulse has been to treat everyone fairly. We believe everyone has the right to equitable treatment. So when we read Matthew 2, we're apt to say God behaved unfairly.

Biblical people didn't necessarily think that way. They knew life was often not fair. They also knew God doesn't always conform to our expectations of what we think God should do.

Perhaps a better question is why the gospel of Matthew tells this story. I offer 4 possible reasons why Matthew included this and what we have to gain from it.

First, Matthew wants to acknowledge the reality of violence in the world. Not only do wars rage between nations, but rulers also use violence against their own people to intimidate and repress. Think of Idi Amin, the former president of Uganda, or Augusto Pinochet, the former dictator of Chile. The gospel, if it is to be any good news at all, must somehow contend with the realities of the world—and violence is one of those realities.

Second, Matthew wants to show that Jesus identifies with refugees and immigrants who move across the face of the earth in search of safety and a better life. When Jesus and his parents fled Bethlehem, they became refugees. When they entered Egypt, they became undocumented immigrants. Therefore Jesus intimately knows the trials and tribulations of refugees throughout history and in our own time. He feels great compassion for refugees since he himself was one.

Third, Matthew wants to demonstrate that despite ferocious opposition, God has endlessly inventive ways of advancing salvation. Notice the sequence of events in the early chapters of Matthew. First God takes action to birth a savior. Then Herod, who by his own choice participates in the powers of evil, fights back and tries to destroy God's saving action. But God counteracted to thwart Herod. If God had not warned Joseph in a dream about Herod's murderous intentions, Jesus would have been assassinated. Matthew wants us to see that God has endlessly inventive ways of outfoxing the Herods of the world in order to advance the cause of salvation. Evil cannot and will not ultimately defeat what God wants to accomplish. In the final analysis, God always wins.

Fourth, Matthew wants to sustain our hope. Yes, violence continues. Yes, evil pushes back against what God wants to do. But neither violence nor evil can prevail in the face of God's matchless ability.

This story is certainly brutal. But for some people in our world, this story is more satisfying than the sweet story of a baby in a manger, rapturously gazed upon by sheep and shepherds, adored by a doting mother and father. That charming story of a baby in a manger is necessary; but the precious moment did not and perhaps could not last. This story of conflict, terror, violence, and flight is more compelling, more inspiring, precisely because it shows us that evil does not win. Evil is a powerful force to be reckoned with, sure. Yet it shall not overpower God. God can outfox evil! Thanks be to God!