



Joy and light, followed

by fear and flight

Why Matthew 2:13-18 should bother us.

BY AMANDA BROBST-RENAUD

Right in the middle of our Christmas celebrations, the biblical story of a joyous birth gives way to a sinister reality—one to make our blood run cold—the Slaughter of the Innocents.

We could talk about Herod the Great's mounting paranoia as he nears the end of his life, leading to the slaughter of his beloved wife Mariamme and her sons. We could even talk about the value of a child (often underestimated and misinterpreted) in the ancient world. None of these conversations would absolve us of the chilling sense that long ago and far away extends to today's threats of tyranny and oppression cloaked

in the guise of legality and expediency. When we allow our society to make children the victims of the political system, we must contend with these texts. More than a window into long ago and far away, Matthew 2:13-18 is a mirror into our own failures to protect the vulnerable.

Fear is a powerful emotion. Our fear responses are designed to keep us safe from threats, yet heightened fear and paranoia can lead to irrational responses to stimuli. When we read about Herod the Great's response to learning about Jesus's birth, we must wonder how a baby, born to a couple in Bethlehem,



when your fears are out of proportion to the situation, they are considered irrational.” The reference to “all Jerusalem”—after all, the Magi seem to have only met with Herod the Great—seems to emphasize the exaggeration of fear, as the irrational fears of a paranoid monarch portray an infant as a threat to the larger society.

Matthew’s Gospel gives us a chilling reminder that Jesus is born into a world of power plays and political machinations, a world unprepared for and threatened by Emmanuel (“God with us”). It soon becomes clear that Herod is a threat to Jesus’ safety, rather than Jesus being a threat to his. In fact, Herod has cast the most vulnerable in society as a threat, in order to justify violence against them.

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, 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 magi.
—Matthew 2:16

could pose such a threat.

Matthew 2:3 tells us: “When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him.”

Theologian Monica Melanchthon posits that “all Jerusalem” is shorthand for the elite, and their fear is a response to the perceived loss of control. Matthew’s narrative, she writes, “sheds light on the manner in which various sections of the elite colluded, perhaps for varied reasons and with differing agendas, but united in purpose to quash attempts by the marginalized to assert their rights or request affirmation of their identity.”

Their fear of the infant outpaces the threat. Because the infant is not among the elite, with no possibility of upward mobility for the lower social classes, there is no reason to suspect that Jesus poses a threat.

Therapist and writer Danielle Wade calls fear “a typical human response to danger.” She adds: “But

Because Herod is furious that the magi have seen through his scheme, what was once a threat against a specific child—Jesus—becomes a threat to all children two years old and younger. Now Herod is attempting to assuage his paranoia through a grotesque show of strength. In the words of theologian Thomas G. Long, “the chronicles of human history are full of dictators who believe they can secure their power through murder and genocide.” While we as readers know that Jesus is safely on his way to Egypt, the children who remain in Jerusalem are vulnerable. No dream warnings offer their families protection from this nightmare.

Our readings give us this narrative of power and paranoia, flight and trauma, just four days after we celebrate the Nativity of Our Lord. It is jarring, to say the least. Many of us overlook or ignore the story. Even the Revised Common Lectionary skirts the story by skipping from the Magi’s visit (Matthew 2:1–12) on Epiphany Sunday to Jesus’s baptism the

following Sunday. Debates around the historicity of this episode (unattested outside of Matthew), provide sufficient distraction and reason for some to say: “Surely it didn’t really happen.” Perhaps not. However, because it was written in the shadow of the Jewish-Roman War (66–70 CE), even if it did not happen precisely as described, it likely still hit close to home for people whose children were innocent victims of war and political systems that choose to regard the most vulnerable in society as threats. Matthew’s uncomfortable narrative reflects back to us a reality that we don’t want to live in. And yet we do.

Coming at a time when many would prefer to overlook hardship and trauma, Matthew 2:1–18 helps those of us in majority cultures cultivate a widened sense of what it means to celebrate “God with us.” The one who is “God with us” is born into an occupied territory (Roman-occupied Judea), flees as a refugee to another country, and has no say in the matter and no capacity to protect himself. This narrative of flight and trauma helps those of us with privilege to also see “God with them”—God, who is with those who are both vulnerable and labeled as a threat.

As Sebastián Doane, who writes about the Bible and violence, suggests, “Matthew 1–2 has the potential to engage readers in ethical questions of social responsibility and political action.” In this way, Scripture invites us to look again at those who are vulnerable, yet who are labeled as threats, to wonder whether they look a bit like the Holy Family.

In the United States today, the most vulnerable in our society—the immigrants, the ones without papers, those who fled their homes for reasons of safety—are seen as a threat. Children, under family separation policies (more than 4,600 children from 2017–2021), were separated from their parents as a

migration deterrent. According to the Human Rights Watch organization, “as many as 1,360 children have never been reunited with their parents six years after the United States government forcibly separated them at the US border to deter migrants.” At the time this policy was enacted, I was a PhD student in Texas. My child was two. It did not take much for me to put myself in the shoes of mothers separated from their toddlers at the border. At that time, I wrote:

As Hugo cries “Mama” from his room the fourth time, I remind him it is time to go to sleep. “I don’t want to,” he says. “Lay here. Right there.”

Most nights, I tell him I’m going to let him cry, that I will still be here, and that he needs to go to sleep. “Mama’s not going anywhere. I love you,” I say, heading down the stairs as he says “I yohve you” in his little sing-song voice.

But not tonight. Tonight, I hold him close. He doesn’t know why I am crying. He doesn’t know that I am imagining him calling out in a place he does not know, a place where he does not know the language, a place where the adults can’t adequately explain why his mama or papa isn’t coming.

The Lord’s Prayer haunts me tonight. “On earth as it is in heaven” is followed by “Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who have sinned against us,” reminding me that the world we’ve created for our children is one bereft of humanity. While many cannot imagine having their children taken from them, we enact others’ worst nightmares.

These days, I still find panic rising in my throat as I look at my child, now aged 9, and wonder how many of those 1,360 children are his age. How many of them are named Jesús—a popular name in Spanish? Can't that name jar us into the reality of Jesus then and Jesús today? Instead of a city on a hill, instead of a safe haven from the tumult of violence, that child's only comfort may be in calling out to God, hoping that, at least, "God with us" will draw near and cradle him to sleep.


Matthew 2:13-18 is supposed to bother us. The story of the Slaughter of the Innocents reflects a world that no child should live in, a world where


God-with-us comes as a migrant fleeing political violence and persecution. The gospel writer Matthew asks us to cry out with Rachel for her children... for our children... for all children. Can we remember that Jesus walked the path of the migrant child? Can we hear Jesus inviting us to look again with new eyes as he continues to dwell among us?


I hope and pray that we will see the reign of God drawing near, teaching us to go home by a different path, a path of protection for vulnerable people and peace for those who protect them. 🌿


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