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Text: Matthew 2:1 – 18

Place: Midweek

Title: The surprises of Christmas 3: A king scared of a baby?

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I can remember the huge number of Christmas cards my Grandma had. Every window had three lines of string with a train of cards along each one. And there are so many designs! Stars, Christmas trees, angels, the manger, Joseph leading Mary on a donkey. Some are decidedly European with heavy snow and fir trees. Some are the total opposite: blazing sun and the beaches of Australia. Some are absent of any religious message: all Santas and reindeer; others are super-religious with gold halos and pious expressions. Others still try to be realistic, showing the manger and the shepherds, or the visit of the Wise Men.

None depict the aspect of the first Christmas we will think about tonight. Or, at least thankfully I have never got a card like it!

For even as the Wise Men saw the star over Bethlehem and were overjoyed, dark clouds of hatred were forming. And as the young family escaped by night for Egypt those clouds burst in a violence that consumed the little ones of Bethlehem. It's an aspect of the Christmas story that is understandably overlooked. But we must consider it because it is a disturbing insight into a reality that tinsel and trees and toys cannot hide.

And it brings us closer to why the first Christmas had to happen. It is one of many moments when the warfare that is taking place in unseen places breaks out into the open.

But let's look first of all at the wickedness of Herod, the king scared of a baby.

At first glance that sounds ridiculous: a powerful king scared of a helpless baby! But we need to think about who this king was. Herod was a capable administrator but also capable of great wickedness. After thirty-five years of rule he was paranoid, ruthless, cruel; insanely suspicious of anyone who might challenge his throne. So in **verse 3 of Matthew 2**, when Herod was disturbed, so was all Jerusalem with him - for good reason. When Herod was disturbed, people ducked for cover.

Being only half-Jewish he had only a tenuous claim to the throne, and he was there only because of the backing of the hated Roman government. But now with news of the birth of a claimant to the throne of David, the rightful throne, the Messianic throne, he was ready to commit any atrocity to maintain his authority. The deaths of maybe a couple of dozen infants didn't matter to him as long as he got the one he was after.

In fact, the murder of these babies doesn't rate a mention in the chronicles of his reign. There were far too many other slaughters committed on his orders for this one to be written down. Although, it is recorded that when Caesar Augustus was told about Herod slaughtering babies in Syria Augustus said 'It is safer to be Herod's pig than his son!'

But this tragedy being only one among many would have been no consolation for the parents of those little ones slain to protect a wicked man's power. And in their distress Matthew, by the Holy Spirit, recognises a greater pattern.

He quotes **Jeremiah 31:15**

This is what the LORD says: 'A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because her children are no more.'

Rachel, one of Jacob's wives, was the mother of some of the boys who would become the tribes of Israel. As Jeremiah watches her descendants gather at Ramah, her burial place, to be herded off into exile and the weakest killed along the way, he pictures her deeply grieving. She sees her children cruelly treated by worldly powers: Assyria then Babylon.

Now another worldly power continues the killing of her children and driving others into exile, this time to Egypt. And as Joseph takes his family into Egypt we're reminded that it was in Egypt where another king, long before, also ordered the killing of all baby boys. What a terrible pattern is emerging!

This wasn't the only time Jesus' life was threatened. He remained under threat throughout his life. **John 11** records the reaction of the Sanhedrin to the news that Jesus has raised Lazarus from the dead. They knew that he was doing miracles; miracles that caused people to believe that he is the Messiah. Miracles that *proved* he is the Messiah.

Yet because he threatened their hold on power, they wanted him dead. They wanted Lazarus dead (again!) because of his indisputable testimony that Jesus raised him from the dead!

When the time came for Jesus to lay his life down on his terms, the leaders poured out their hate and scorn on him. We'll think about that a bit more later.

But what is it with wicked people in power and the death and torment of children? Why is there such a pattern in the Bible of babies killed on the orders of kings?

That's why we need to draw back the dark curtain and get a glimpse of what is happening in the unseen world. These terrible expressions of human cruelty are instances of cooperation with the plans of Satan.

And they go right back to the garden of Eden.

When the Deceiver successfully tempted Adam and Eve, he believed he had won. Satan had destroyed the relationship between God and those created in his image.

Yet what God says in judgement must have caught Satan by surprise. Even in judgement God takes humanity's side and declares that a descendant of Eve will crush Satan's head. Ever since that day Satan was running scared of that promised destroyer. Herod and Pharaoh; cruel, powerful men were scared of children because of the threat they posed to their rule.

Satan was even more scared of babies because any one of them might be that destroyer ready to finally crush his head. And that fear and hatred erupted in murder right from the start. From Abel on, anyone who looked remotely like the promised one was attacked with all the fury of the Evil One. And like Hitler in his bunker, willing to destroy all Germany as long as he remained, Satan was willing to destroy millions if it meant killing the one destined to crush him.

That is the reality behind the atrocities of Pharaoh and Herod.

And although the Messiah has now come and has been victorious over the evil one, Satan still has deep animosity towards children. If child-like faith and trust is what brings delight to God, then it is a torment for Satan. And that is why Jesus says so very strongly in **Mark 9:42**

If anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck.

Jesus is so uncompromising here because anyone who does this is doing Satan's work.

That is the reason why we have our ministries to children. Children can respond to the gospel and become active, vital members of the kingdom and we need to encourage them and protect them. That is why we also have a child protection policy, so children can learn about Jesus and grow in him in a safe environment. And the testimony of our ministries to children is that Jesus continues to win the victory.

Studies have shown that the vast majority of Christians came to faith while they were children. God delights in calling children into his kingdom and destroying the work of the evil one.

Now I have concentrated on Satan and his co-workers tonight.

But the greater story is the victory of God. Yes, Satan is a threat and a great enemy. But he will never win. He will not even come close. His murderous plan to destroy Jesus utterly failed.

The massacre of the babies in Bethlehem is a terrible thing. But it is one of the things Jesus came to stop. Because of Jesus' victory, there is coming a day when wickedness by those in power will be brought to account. Dictators may die peacefully in their beds, but they will not escape standing before God in judgement.

Jesus won his victory over Satan through his death, by the way of suffering. And he stands with those who suffer. In the words of the prophecy in **Genesis 3** Satan was able to bruise his heel, but Jesus well and truly crushed his head.

And we can see that right here in **Matthew 2**.

While Satan has his willing accomplices, God has his faithful servants.

The Wise Men, who originally followed God's leading when they saw a star, in **verse 12** now obey his warning to them in a dream and don't report to Herod but head home another way. And Joseph himself is a quiet hero. A young man, a carpenter, called to raise a king. The same night he was told to go to Egypt he gathered his family and went.

Through ordinary, frail people God delights to win his victories.

Satan loves to have his voice in the ear of the powerful or people in love with power and themselves. God delights in trusting, child-like faith wherever it is found.

The warfare that breaks out into the open at the first Christmas continues today. And every human on earth is a participant in the battle. Jesus tells us that we are either for him or against him. There are no neutral parties.

So I need to ask you today: Whose side are you on?

Now none of us would consider ourselves a Herod. There's no way I'm like him! But what is the common link between Herod, Pharaoh, and the people responsible for Jesus' death?

They all felt threatened. They weren't going to give up their hold on power, their control over their own life and destiny.

Often, we want to remain king or queen of our lives rather than let our legitimate King rule us. So Jesus might threaten you. Threaten your sense of intellectual pride, or your self-righteousness, or your determination to set the course of your life the way you want it.

Jesus says he is a king who is gentle and humble in heart, who will rule your life graciously, and in fact will give you the freedom and peace you seek but will not find on your own.

If you have submitted to Jesus as your king you know what I'm talking about: who could want for a better Teacher, King and Saviour than Jesus? And if you are a citizen of his kingdom, he wants you to fight nobly and faithfully in the warfare. And that means refusing to have anything to do with the tactics of the enemy.

As we look at our Christmas cards and recognise the unseen warfare taking place around that quiet manger, warfare that continues today, whose side are you on?