

# THIS TENDER LIFE

*The Rev. Geoff Parker to Foreside Community Church - Falmouth, ME*

Thursday, December 26, 2019

Scripture: [Matthew 2:13–23](#)

## INTRODUCTION TO THE SCRIPTURE

So... I would say, “now for something completely different,” but that would make you think Monty Python, and it would make you think funny... and, well, today’s scripture is not that. It’s one of those when I wish the pews came with seat belts.

For a long time now, it has been the tradition to tell stories of Jesus’s infancy and childhood in the season of Christmas-tide that we are in. This is one of those stories, right after Jesus has been born.

It relies on a character that we’ve only heard a little about so far... the local ruler of the Roman province of Judea where Jesus is from: King Herod, Herod the Great, to be specific. We will meet his successors, too.

Like all people who had something to do with his name being changed to “Whatever the Great,” Herod likes power. He likes it so much, that he has allied himself with the greatest power in his world, the Roman Empire. This has allowed him to rule over Judea on behalf of Rome, despite being Jewish himself. (Though by all accounts not being particularly good at it...) He will hear in the birth of Jesus a threat... where those wise ones we’ll get to next week, see a child who is to be honored and celebrated.

Our story begins like so many of our Christmas stories do: an angel appears. Now, remember, angels always say (be not afraid), this one doesn’t say to be afraid... it just says, “It’s time to go. And when I say, go, I mean *now*.” Because what follows is scary.

At the same time, we’ll hear a psalm... which invites us to praise God along with all creation, showing us through nature, and maybe telling us a little something about what we ought to think of all these “kings of earth.”

## SERMON

There are two ways we need to wrestle with this disturbing story from Matthew.

**One is as a text that is, above everything else, interested in telling the story of Jesus as the fulfillment of God's promises of a successor to the line of David who will be the Messiah.**

So, to begin with, let me go ahead and say, this is one of those stories that perplexes those who would read the bible solely as a history book. It doesn't work in that way. Herod the Great is a real ruler in a real time, (you can go and see buildings he built still) and he has a history, and many actions... and by all accounts he was a harsh puppet king of the Romans, but there is no mention in any other source, or evidence of this story.

So, why the frame job?

For that, you have to understand that for the writer of the Gospel of Matthew is writing for a Jewish audience of Jesus followers who were seeking to understand him as the fulfillment of God's promises to King David and the people of Israel.

So, this story sets up two things: it creates a kind of bizarro-world Passover story, mirroring the death of the first born of Egypt as the Israelites escape. (This is your casual reminder that we have generally stuck to the slightly goofy plagues in our memory of Moses and Pharaoh... it ain't all frogs.)

It also fulfills prophetic writing, and mirroring by making Jesus the new Moses, walking out of Egypt... but to walk out of Egypt, he has to go **to** Egypt, and so this story and threat from Herod stand to move him away from Bethlehem (where he had to be born to be "of David") and allow him to still walk into Judea as he eventually leaves Egypt (which has actually been his sanctuary, rather than his captivity as it was for Moses.)

**The second way to wrestle with this story is as a straight-up horror of what happens when humans try to horde "power-over" instead of working with the flow of God's power-with or power-through... and how tender, fragile, and precious life is in the midst of that kind of tyranny.**

Though we don't have all the facts of Herod to work with here, we are reminded by this story of so many others who have clung to power so tightly, that even a child could seem to threaten them... and draw them to threats and violence. I have watched some world leaders behaving badly with the young climate activist Greta Thunberg to know that this is true still.

You may have sometimes heard the greeting that is often attributed to the Masai tribes of Northern Africa, just a question: "How are the children?"

This story throws that question into stark light. How are the children, when their very lives can be a threat to the might of kings? How are the children when they are ruled by an empire that makes peace through military might? How are the children when the gaps between the highs and lows of life seem to be the greatest they have ever been?

We often seem to think of Jesus's early life as somewhat unremarkable, if not peaceful... as if it was only when he began his public ministry that he opened himself up to threats and death from the empire and leaders he began to question and trouble. This story tells a different truth... his life was always in danger... the very fact and vulnerability of God come to live with us was too dangerous to live in the realms of Kings.

The reality, regardless of the history of Herod's brutality, whether he committed the crimes we tell of him or not... is that Jesus was God come to share human life... and thus human frailty, and so has God, and we see that from the very start: no sooner is he born but he faces threats and the need to flee for his life.

It reminds us that we can sometimes despair still to this day as we ask "How are the children?"

We know that just getting born is tough work. Along with infants, the U.S. has seen a disturbing rise in maternal mortality... <sup>[1]</sup> Those rates are about 3 times higher for Black, Native American women according to the CDC. <sup>[2]</sup>

We know that children, whose parents fleeing from their homelands, led by maybe the same sorts of dreams as Joseph... fleeing from violence and threats, are suffering at our borders.

We know that too many children in other countries, and in this countries, have seen or experienced violence from family members or strangers... from abuse, or from random acts of violence at the point of a gun.

"How are the children?" can sometimes feel like a cry of despair in this world.

Yet, here, this day, there is great cause for hope, no matter what you might think. I was heartened by a good column from Nicholas Kristof in the NYTimes:

*Historically, almost half of all humans died in childhood. As recently as 1950, 27 percent of all children still died by age 15. Now that figure has dropped to about 4 percent.*

*Every day for the last decade newspapers could have run the headline "The number of people living on more than \$10 a day increased by 245,000 yesterday."*

Kristoff again:

*You may feel uncomfortable reading [the good news.] It can seem tasteless, misleading or counterproductive to hail progress when there is still so much wrong with the world. I get that... But I worry that deep pessimism about the state of the world is paralyzing rather than empowering; excessive pessimism can leave people feeling not just hopeless but also helpless. [3]*

We are not hopeless. In our class this Advent, we had an important conversation about hope... It is easy to tame hope... call it some sort of sunny disposition in the face of terror and feel like we may never have it...

But this story is the real hope story... hope is simply life in the face of death. We say that the lights shines in the darkness and the darkness did it overcome it... and we say that a little child survived when all the armies of the King came charging... Hope is the miracle of life in the face of poverty, war, tyranny and more... Hope is the reality that a single life can be that miracle which might change the world, and it is the reality that therefore **all** lives can be the miracle that changes it just as well...

In very real ways, every time we breathe... we hope... there is a possibility in that... every time we sing, we rejoice that hope still lives.

And so, we are not helpless... because even in this horror story, life finds a way to Egypt, and then back to Judea, and lives to grow wise and walk with friends and strangers and dare to tell them that Kings are not God... that God cares deeply for the poor, the fragile, the broken hearted, that rulers will crumble

With the Psalmist, we proclaim that all nature worships and adores the God that dwells with the smallest child, vulnerable and fragile, and yet filled with the awesome wonder of possibility and life... in whom we find the invitation to discover God with us **all**, and the hope to continue to answer with joy

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1. <https://www.npr.org/2017/05/12/528098789/u-s-has-the-worst-rate-of-maternal-deaths-in-the-developed-world> ↩
  2. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/11/magazine/black-mothers-babies-death-maternal-mortality.html> ↩
  3. Nicholas Kristof - <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/28/opinion/sunday/2019-best-year-poverty.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share> ↩