

Slaughter of the Innocents

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Readings:

Matthew 2:13-23

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."

Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son."

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, 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 wise men.

Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

"A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more."

When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said,

"Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead."

Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel.

But when he heard that Archelaus (ahr'kuh-LAY-uhs) was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee.

There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, "He will be called a Nazorean."

After the Titanic - Derek Mahon

They said I got away in a boat
And humbled me at the inquiry. I tell you
I sank as far that night as any
Hero. As I sat shivering on the dark water
I turned to ice to hear my costly
Life go thundering down in a pandemonium of
Prams, pianos, sideboards, winches,
Boilers bursting and shredded ragtime. Now I hide
In a lonely house behind the sea
Where the tide leaves broken toys and hat-boxes
Silently at my door. The showers of
April, flowers of May mean nothing to me, nor the

Late light of June, when my gardener
Describes to strangers how the old man stays in bed
On seaward mornings after nights of
Wind, takes his cocaine and will see no-one. Then it is
I drown again with all those dim
Lost faces I never understood. My poor soul
Screams out in the starlight, heart
Breaks loose and rolls down like a stone.
Include me in your lamentations.

Questionnaire – Wendell Berry

Matt

1. How much poison are you willing to eat for the success of the free market and global trade? Please name your preferred poisons.
2. For the sake of goodness, how much evil are you willing to do? Fill in the following blanks with the names of your favorite evils and acts of hatred.
3. What sacrifices are you prepared to make for culture and civilization? Please list the monuments, shrines, and works of art you would most willingly destroy.
4. In the name of patriotism and the flag, how much of our beloved land are you willing to desecrate? List in the following spaces the mountains, rivers, towns, farms you could most readily do without.
5. State briefly the ideas, ideals, or hopes, the energy sources, the kinds of security, for which you would kill a child. Name, please, the children whom you would be willing to kill.

Sermon:

Last week, I was talking with Kerri Meyer, our Director of Religious Education about teaching in the coming months, and we discussed Unitarian Universalist history, which is

taught to the early grade levels. She told me that we no longer teach about some of the martyrs in our tradition, people like John Huss or Michael Servetus, who were both burned at the stake. It's not that the young children are terrified of such stories; rather, they're overly fascinated. They are transfixed by the idea of martyrdom by burning, and they keep asking questions, and the class just stops.

We too are both fascinated by, and recoil from, such sensational stories, and today's story, the Slaughter of the Innocents, is no exception. Different faith traditions struggle with how to deal with Biblical texts like this one, and respond in different ways. When they read today's selection from Matthew in church, the Roman Catholics skip carefully over the two verses that describe the actual killing of the infant children. Most Lutheran and many other Protestant churches consider the whole story, but only once every three years. But this is Unity Church, where we boldly examine this story every year.

The book of Matthew is the only Biblical text that describes the Slaughter of the Innocents. Matthew tells the meat of the story in just two short verses: "When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old and under, according to the time that he learned from the wise men."

Like many Biblical stories, this one remains meaningful today because its message is ambiguous; it doesn't offer easy answers or an obvious lesson. We can go in many directions trying to find meaning in this story.

One direction is to approach this story technically. We can use Biblical criticism to try to learn more about its historical accuracy, and why it is presented the way it is. Since Matthew is the only Biblical or extra-Biblical source to mention the Slaughter of the Innocents, most scholars doubt the historical accuracy of the story. But even if it is not actually true, we can read the story on a different level. To paraphrase Ruth MacKenzie, "this story is not fact, but it is also not fiction". Let's look deeper: Why is this story here and what purpose did it serve?

The book of Matthew was almost certainly not written by my namesake, that disciple of Jesus named Matthew. This book was written at least a half-century after Jesus' death, assembled from at least two sources, and so wouldn't be admissible as an eyewitness account. This book was written during a time when the early Christians were beginning to establish a separate identity from the Jews. The author of Matthew tried to establish that Jesus was the Messiah of Jewish prophecy, and therefore worthy of serious attention.

To show Jesus as fulfilling Hebrew prophecy, the author of Matthew uses a number of so-called "formula quotations". These are the lines that say something like, "this was to fulfill what was spoken by Lord through the prophet". Even in our reading today, there are three examples of such formula quotations in just ten short verses.

The Slaughter of the Innocents story allows Jesus to fulfill prophecy: to be born in Bethlehem, steal away and come out of Egypt, and land in Nazareth, where he grows up.

All of these details fit various prophecies. So some Bible scholars look at the Slaughter of the Innocents as merely a plot device to move the larger story of Jesus along in a particular way. That's kind of interesting, but also unsatisfying.

Another way to approach the story is to look for its theological message. The story compels us to consider the meaning of a God that acts in the world, who allows some innocent people to die and saves others. This is the question of 'theodicy', in the lingo, and it is a difficult question. How can an all-knowing, all-powerful, completely good God allow suffering and evil to exist?

During my training I worked as a chaplain in a hospital. Patients would occasionally ask me the question: "Why did God let this happen to me?" I could only respond to their questions with other questions that helped them to make sense of it all for themselves, for I did not have any answers.

Some found an answer in their faith. Surely their suffering is all part of God's master plan, which will be revealed to them in the great by-and-by. For others, such a sense of God's plan is not enough.

I recall a friend in seminary, a man with conservative politics and a Southern Baptist preacher's understanding of the Bible. This man had transferred to our liberal seminary from the big fundamentalist seminary in town. When I asked him why he transferred, he told me the story of his son who died of cancer. He had asked friends at the conservative seminary why this happened, and the answer they told him was: "Romans". I said, "Romans?" He said, "yes, Romans 8:28", 'all things work together for good, to them that love God, that are called according to his purpose'. When he could not reconcile his son's suffering and dying to some divine plan, he found his way to liberal Christianity.

A third way of approaching a story like the Slaughter of the Innocents is to expand the story. As religious liberals, we can do that! For example, let's imagine what would happen if Jesus learned of the Slaughter of the Innocents. Maybe, he was asking his family about his birth, as we reenacted in our Children's Candlelight Service last week, and someone let the story slip. Perhaps Jesus asked Joseph, "Why didn't we return to Bethlehem?" and Joseph, caught off guard, said something like, "Well, son, that wouldn't have been a good idea because you wouldn't have any playmates." Jesus next question would certainly begin with the word, "Why?" and Joseph would want to say, "Let's change the subject." Imagine for a moment, what first encountering that bit of information would have been like.

Several writers have considered this possibility. Albert Camus, in 'The Fall' suggests that such knowledge might have led Jesus to self-destructive behavior, to acts that led to his crucifixion. That may be taking this too far, in my mind, but the question remains: How does one face the knowledge that they have survived and others did not?

This is often described as Survivor Guilt. This was first noticed in Holocaust survivors, but is encountered with war veterans and survivors of diseases like cancer or AIDS. Today Survivor Guilt is considered a form of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. With Survivor Guilt, the gratitude for being alive is replaced by guilt over those who did not survive, whether or not one's actions had any effect on their survival.

People respond to this in many ways. I think of my Dad, a World War II veteran, a survivor of the Battle of the Bulge and other European and Pacific actions. Like most veterans of World War II, he seldom talks about his experiences. Only rarely, at special times, has he felt comfortable sharing the more horrific aspects of his wartime experience. Veterans of more recent wars may have had greater access to treatment and come home to a civilian community that didn't demand silence, but I understand their struggles are similar. They ask: Why am I here, while my buddy who was sitting next to me, is not? Gratitude and guilt coexist in a complex mixture.

Survivor Guilt becomes even more complicated when issues of moral culpability are involved. Our second reading today, *After the Titanic*, considered the life of J. Bruce Ismay, the director of the White Star line, the company that owned the Titanic. Ismay was on the boat for its maiden voyage, and as it was sinking, he saw a partially filled lifeboat and jumped in. So he got away rather than going down with the ship. He was blamed for the disaster and branded a coward by the newspapers of William Randolph Hearst. The poem portrays a man broken by guilt, going into deeper isolation, seeking the solace of sleep and chemicals. His guilt leads to an icy depression, from which emerges only this plea: "include me in your lamentations".

There is a larger question here. Are we not all survivors, by virtue of still being alive? Do we not all carry some compassion, perhaps even guilt, for those who do not survive? This is the hard question. If we are not asking it at least occasionally, we are not awake.

Consider the environment. Consider the growing evidence of global warming. We all contribute to global warming by virtue of our production of carbon dioxide, that harmless gas that we exhale in every breath. We all produce too much CO₂ in the normal everyday actions of heating our houses, driving our cars or riding the bus, or sitting here under these lights today. We contribute to a climate change that is resulting in increased flooding and death in some regions; to increased drought, famine and war in others; and to environmental degradation and possible mass extinctions. This suffering, these deaths are not easy to face. I know we can all think of many other examples in which our actions contribute, through indirect connections, to the suffering of others in the world. I won't make you feel worse by listing them here.

We must confront the fact that the interconnected web of all existence of which we are a part, our cherished seventh principle of Unitarian Universalism, has a dark side. We cannot escape this. If there is evil, or suffering, however we define it, in the world, it is not confined cleanly to particular locales or particular individuals. We are all connected, in good and in evil. How we respond to this awareness is a measure of our lives.

How do we respond? Some react by attempting to artificially divide the world and its people into separate spheres. Those who respond this way often define their own acts as 'good', and define the various acts of others as 'evil'. There are many ways to draw this line. One can simply define some higher principle, and ignore those suffering who somehow fall outside that principle. Many who support a libertarian form of the free market economy do this. Those who suffer because the economy marginalizes them are blamed for not somehow 'getting it together' as individuals. By blaming individuals, there is no need to confront the systemic complications of family violence, racial oppression, or environmental degradation those individuals face. In this way we build "strange and foolish ... walls of separation that divide us", to use A. Powell Davies' words.

This compartmentalization and separation allows some of us avoid awakening to the reality of such suffering at all. We stay anesthetized, and go about our lives walled off from the reality of such suffering.

Some of us do open ourselves enough to acknowledge suffering, but we do so by maintaining a safe distance, by trying to stay at 10,000 feet high and avoiding the view on the ground. Wendell Berry brings us down to earth with this warning:

State briefly the ideas, ideals or hopes,
the energy sources, the kinds of security,
for which you would kill a child.
Name, please, the children whom
you would be willing to kill.

Others of us seek absolution by taking minor steps that appear to address the suffering, but actually keep us separate from those who suffer. This is too often the liberal response. Friends at another UU church tell me they are having a drawn out conflict over how the church shall decide to pass resolutions about social justice issues. I'm proud to see that Unity Church acts, not by issuing statements, but by actually doing the hard work of social justice through its many associations with organizations like Amicus, the Center for Victims of Torture, the Metropolitan Interfaith Coalition for Affordable Housing, and others. Actions like passing resolutions allow us to feel good for a little while – and then we can go back to sleep.

So, how do we stay awake? How can we respond fully to this reality that we survive and others die? We must work to be both accepting and accountable. We must accept that our influence is limited, but at the same time it is all that we have. To be accountable, we must do what we can to make change and reduce suffering in the world.

How do we keep from becoming paralyzed by the horror and sadness of suffering in the world? We must remember that we are not alone in this. We can build caring connections with others. We can share the reality that we are all survivors, in one way or another. To the degree that we transform our guilt into compassionate action, we begin to awaken, to

atone, and to become at-one with the possibilities of hope and redemption that exist in the world.

Finally, let us return to J. Bruce Ismay, the man who escaped the Titanic. His real story is more interesting and hopeful than this morning's poem would have us believe. Scapegoated in America, removed from leadership of the White Star line, Ismay returned to England, where he served on the board of a shipping insurance company. This company paid out many large claims to families who lost people in the Titanic disaster. Thus, at nearly every company board meeting over the next twenty-five years, Ismay relived both the disaster and his role in it. Through his work, he confronted his accountability as a survivor.

Let us also hold ourselves accountable. Let us act in the world with a greater awareness of the suffering of others. Let us love one another a little more, knowing our imperfections. Let us love one another a little more, knowing that we are all interconnected in good and evil. In the midst of a complex world that we cannot fully comprehend, let us endeavor, however difficult it may be, to remain fully awake.