



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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A Sermon for the Feast of the Holy Innocents St. Matthew 2:13-18 Fr. William Klock

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Have you read a great book and then gone to see the movie and the movie totally lost the plot? Or maybe you got into a TV show, but then the longer the show ran, the more it seemed to lose the original plot? We've been watching one show that started out spectacularly, but now I'm starting wish they'd just ended it after the first season, because lately it feels like the original plot has been hijacked by today's obligatory plot about sexuality. I found myself thinking how ironic it is that in a postmodern culture that claims to hate metanarratives and insists we all write our own stories, its stories all seem to go the same way.

And in the midst of it all, as we all try to write our own stories while having our stories hijacked by the various commercial, political, and sexual plot-writers of our culture, often without our even realising it's happened, well, Christmas comes. And if we'll listen, we just might hear, we must might realise that there's a greater story and a greater drama with a happier ending. A story so wonderful, so masterfully written, that it shows up just what fools we've been to try to write our own stories. A story, too, that's full of grace. A story in which God himself has come into the midst of our mangled plotlines to forgive our bad writing, to remind us how the story is supposed to go and what a truly good story looks like, even to welcome us back into his great drama of love and faithfulness and redemption and glory.

Genesis reminds us how the story was supposed to go: human beings created by God, mortals made of the same stuff as the rest of creation, but animated and brought to life by the very breath of

God. And then we were placed in his temple. In the spot where pagans would place their idols to represent the presence and rule of their gods, the living God placed us. To represent his good and sovereign rule over creation, to act as his stewards, and to know the goodness and the life only found in his presence. It was a story in which we knew all those things we've recalled when lighting the Advent candles—a story of perfect love, peace, joy, and hope. And we were to be fruitful and to multiply so that we might ever expand the Lord's temple until it filled all of creation with his glory.

And then we tried to hijack the temple for ourselves. Instead of being the image of God, we tried to become gods ourselves. And immediately we began to accuse each other. We began to exploit and dominate each other. Within a single generation, as Genesis tells it, we were murdering each other. We were at each other's throats. Everyone out for himself, no matter who he had to step on or exploit or enslave or kill.

I talked last week about the darkness of the pagan world into which Jesus came. A world of petty and fickle gods, constantly fighting amongst themselves. Gods representing the idols of the human heart: power, sex, money, war...you name it. If it can be used to exploit others, we made a god for it. The world was dark. But there was a light—or there was supposed to be. Two millennia before, the living God had called Abraham out of the darkness of pagan Ur and set him up to be a light in the midst of the darkness. A man who knew the light of the living God and became, himself a light to the nations. At first just one man, but then a growing family, and eventually a whole nation—set apart by God and living around a temple in which that light was manifest as a visible and awe-inspiring cloud of glory. But even Israel succumbed to the darkness. The kings and people of Israel did what rebellious humanity had always done: they tried to write their own script. And so Jesus came not only to the dark world of the pagans; he also came to the dark world of Israel.

Our Gospel today is a stark reminder of just how off-script things had gone for God's own people. It picks up immediately after the wise men had visited Jesus. Remember that they had travelled to Jerusalem from somewhere in the east, probably Persia, following a star that somehow told them that a king had been born. They went to the palace of Herod, who was the King of the Jews—at least in title. And when they asked where they might find the newborn King of the Jews, of course, he had no idea what they were talking about. These foreigners had to remind him of his own scriptures about the coming king, the one who would finally shepherd God's people aright, and how he would be born at Bethlehem.

From Jerusalem, the wise men travelled to Bethlehem where they became the first of the gentiles to worship Jesus the Messiah. And you'll remember that an angel came to them and warned them to avoid Jerusalem on their way home. But Herod didn't forget the prophecy or the wise men. He bore the title "King of the Jews", but he wasn't really Jewish. He was the child of a forbidden marriage between a Jew and a gentile. He was a puppet king set up by the Romans. He tried to win the people over with grand building projects and public works. The most important was a renovation of the temple. But no one like him and no one really thought he was the legitimate king. And so he was also paranoid. He wasn't above murdering his own sons just to make sure he had no rivals.

And so, St. Matthew tells us, "After the wise men had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. 'Get up,' he said, 'and take the child and his mother and hurry to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you. Herod is going to hunt for the child, to kill him.'"

Tom Wright tells a story that I expect must have happened when he was Bishop of Durham. A prominent historian who was well-known for his scepticism about the Bible showed up at church one Christmas. Wright was preaching. And when the service was over, the historian approached him and said something to the effect of, "I've got it all figured out why people love

Christmas so much. It's about a baby and babies threaten no one, and so we all feel good, but in the end it's really all about nothing." And Wright goes on to say just how dumbfounded he was. Had this man not heard the Christmas story? Right here from the get-go, an evil king—a king who insisted on writing his own story—did everything he could to stop God's rewrite before it could even be started.

Considering how impious Herod was, I suspect he didn't even really believe the prophecy about Bethlehem and a king. He was just a paranoid despot who had it in his power to murder people frivolously, so...why not? You know, just in case.

"So," Matthew goes on, "Joseph got up and took the child and his mother by night and went off to Egypt. He stayed there until the death of Herod. This happened to fulfil what the Lord said through the prophet [Hosea]: 'Out of Egypt I called my son.'"

And so Jesus escapes, but there's no good news here. Herod just lashes out blindly. He's powerful, he can, and he does. And so Matthew tells us, "When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he flew into a great rage. He dispatched men to kill all the boys of Bethlehem, and in all the surrounding districts, from two years old and under, according to the time the wise men had told him. That was when the word that came through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled: 'There was heard a voice in Rama, crying and loud lamentation. Rachel is weeping for her children, and will not let anyone comfort her, because they are no more.'"

Tell me again how this baby threatens no one. The shadow of the cross hangs over Jesus' story before he can even walk or talk. Because Herod couldn't stand the thought of not being the master of his own story. And under threat, he did what he always did: he murdered. How many? Bethlehem was likely a town of about a thousand people in those days. There were probably somewhere between a dozen and two dozen boys there two years old and

younger. And Herod didn't give it a thought to have them killed. And apparently neither did his soldiers. That, or they feared Herod more than they feared God.

Again, Herod reminds us that it wasn't just a dark pagan world into which Jesus was born. The same darkness hung over Israel. Because Herod's problem is a universal one. Ever since Adam and Eve, we've all been trying to write our own stories and to put ourselves in the place of God. To define for ourselves who we are and what our purpose is. To define for ourselves what is right and what is wrong. And the end result of all of our self-serving stories is that we trample and abuse and exploit others to further our own ends. None of us has the relatively unchecked power of an ancient near eastern despot like Herod and so we balk at his evil. And yet here in Canada the official statistics show that about 20% of pregnancies in any given year are ended by abortion. And that number is low, because it under-reports at-home chemical abortions. If we can get away with it, if we can dehumanise another person in our minds, and if that child threatens the story we're trying to write for ourselves, many, many, many of us will do precisely what Herod did and kill an innocent. And many will and have done it repeatedly. Abortion is an extreme example. Maybe we'd never dream of going that far to guard the narrative we write for ourselves. Maybe we'd never go that far in our attempt to play God. But this rot, this rebellion that corrupts human relationships spreads its roots through our society in all sorts of ways. Maybe it's the influence of the wicked principalities and powers that St. Paul writes about in Ephesians—trying to corrupt everything, even the good systems we try to put in place. But the rot spread. Recently I was listening to a friend tell me the havoc pornography has wreaked in her life. We tend to think of pornography use as a personal sexual sin—and that's certainly part of it—but this conversation had me thinking that at the heart of pornography is a dehumanising exploitation of others. It turns fellow human beings into objects to be used to fulfil our own ends, human

beings turned into non-player characters in the sinful and self-gratifying stories we write for ourselves. It's not *just* about sex or sexual immorality. It's about the abuse and exploitation for our own ends of fellow human beings, created by God, meant to bear his image, fellow priests of his temple to whom we have an obligation of love and humility and grace and respect.

And when you think about it in those terms, you start to see just how much our rebellion against God, just how much our desire to write our own stories and to be our own gods infects and corrupts our network of relationships. Our marriages and our families break down because we choose to use our husbands or our wives or our children to fill roles in the stories we write for ourselves, instead of being the fellow players we're meant to be in God's great drama. We do the same thing in business and with the people we employ—as if they exist to serve us, to meet our needs, to act their parts in our stories. And then we get into economics and politics and without even realising it, we've let the powerful and the well-placed convince us to live out their stories—that we have to be *this* and buy *that* in order to be fulfilled and happy. That we have to support *this* and vote for *that*, that we have to hate *this* person over here and *that* person over there because they have the wrong values, support the wrong thing, or are playing parts in the wrong narrative. And so we write those people into our stories as the bad guys or the guys to be exploited or the guys to be hated or the guys who aren't really human at all—they're garbage, trash, something sub-human. And they do the same to us and it spiral and spirals and the pain and the sorrow and the hurt and tears just get worse and worse. And we get caught up in all of this and forget that none of these stories, none of these narratives, none of these dramas matter one whit. Brothers and Sisters, it's God's great drama that matters; it's God's drama that we need to remember and live.

And God knows all this. He knows how we've fallen. He knows how we so want to write our stories for ourselves.

He knows—better than we do—the pain and the misery and the tears that we inflict on others and that they inflict on us. And so he comes, as the baby, into the midst of the darkness and the tears and, again, before he can even walk or talk, he’s a homeless refugee in a foreign land with a king looking to kill him.

This was the thing no one expected of the Messiah. They expected a great king, like David, but greater. Born in a place. Eventually riding in to Jerusalem in a chariot to bash Roman heads and to set the world to rights by putting Israel on the top of the heap. They expect that because the people of Israel were still trying to write their own story for themselves. But, instead, Jesus is born in humility to ordinary parents. From his birth he knows the danger and the tears of being part of someone else’s wicked story. All things that Israel should have known. This is what Matthew is getting at when he quotes Hoses saying, “Out of Egypt I called my son.” *That’s* who Israel was. They were God’s beloved son and they were the rescued-from-Egyptian-slavery people, born in sorrow and tears and pain, exploited and abused by a king who thought he was a god and who forced them to live his drama. Jesus came the same way. He knew the pain of sin. He knew the pain of abuse. He knew what it meant to be forced to live as someone else’s non-player character.

And in that echo of Israel’s past and Israel’s identity, there’s hope. Again, Matthew cites the prophets—this time Jeremiah—as he recounts the horrible murder of the holy innocents of Bethlehem. Think again of Pharaoh, threatened by the fruitfulness of the Israelites. Pretty soon there would be more of them than there were Egyptians. And so he ordered their baby boys to be drowned in the Nile. Rachel wept for her children, as Jeremiah said. But Moses, Israel’s deliverer—Israel’s first “messiah”, if you will—escaped in the Lord’s providence, and rose up to challenge Pharaoh and his gods and to lead the people out of their bondage in Egypt. Just so, Matthew wants us to hear that story echoing in the story of

Jesus. Like Pharaoh, Herod tried to write his own story, he tried to stamp out the Lord’s deliverer, but the Lord is sovereign and somehow always manages to take our bad and pathetic rewrites and bring them into his own great drama to further his own ends and to reveal his glory to the world.

He did this at the cross, Brothers and Sisters. The people of Judaea, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the priest and Levites and scribes together with Pilate as the representative of Rome and the pagan nations, they tried to write their own story—a story in which Jesus was a pretend king and a blasphemer of the temple and the things of God, a story in which they were right and Jesus was wrong, a story in which they were justified in rejecting and mocking and crucifying the son of God as a false messiah. And that Friday when Jesus gasped out, “It is finished” and his friends took him down from the cross and buried him in a tomb, the people of Judaea, the Pharisees and the Sadducees, Pilate and Rome all thought they had the happy ending they wanted. They were the heroes of their own stories and Jesus was dead, but all the while God was using their rebellion and their grasping at godhood to his own ends. They rebelled, but God in his sovereign grace, incorporated their stories into his own to serve his own ends. A story in which evil and sin and death foolishly concentrated themselves all in one place, in which evil and sin and death did their worst—and failed—as three days later Jesus burst out of the tomb with the power of God’s life and his new creation. Burst from the tomb alive to sweep the whole of creation itself up into God’s great drama of light and life.

Brother and Sisters, that’s grace. If this were one of our stories, we’d fire the writers who made such a mess of it and consign them to oblivion, but God instead comes in love and grace to forgive and to set right. He takes our horrible stories and, master storyteller that he is, he uses them for good and instead of consigning us to oblivion, he offers us our places back in the great divine drama we once rejected...if we will only trust that he is the way and the

truth and the life, if we will give him our allegiance and pledge to live out his story instead of ours. It should be such an easy choice when see the wake of destruction our stories have left in contrast to his great story of love and grace that leads to life and new creation and all the sad things we’ve written for ourselves somehow one day becoming all untrue.

Brothers and Sisters, hear the Christmas story again this year. Really and truly hear it so that it drowns out and overcomes all the other narratives and stories and dramas you’ve been hearing and living. Let it be a reset. Let this story of God, humbly incarnate who humbly dies for rebellious sinners, let this truth become the truth by which you measure everything. Let the glorious light of resurrection and new creation and the presence of God be your hope and your only hope and be so overcome by it that you lose all desire to write your story for yourself, and choose to become a faithful player in Jesus’ drama of love and peace, of joy and hope.

Let’s pray: Almighty God, whose loving purposes cannot be frustrated by the wickedness of men, so that even infants may glorify you by their deaths: strengthen us by your grace, that by the innocency of our lives and constancy of our faith even to death, we may glorify your holy name, through Jesus Christ our Lord who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*