

*The Scandal of Christmas: The Wrong Reaction*  
*By Jason Huff*  
*December 20, 2014*  
*Jeremiah 31:10-17, Revelation 21:1-5, Matthew 2:13-23*

Friends, our final reading tonight is from Matthew 2:13-23. I invite you to turn there in your Bibles and to follow along with your bulletin insert. Let's listen to the Word of God. "When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him." So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son." When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: "A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more." After Herod died, an angel of the Lord 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 trying to take the child's life are dead." So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets: "He will be called a Nazarene."

Have you ever heard a story and you knew there was more to it? I started collecting DVDs when they were introduced, and one reason was for missing scenes. Movies are edited for length before they hit the theater, and DVD is a great way to restore the extras. From old films like **Metropolis** to modern epics like the **Lord of the Rings**, DVDs allow us to see what we've been missing. In some cases, hours of footage is restored. It's amazing to see what was lost.

But sometimes, stories are edited for the reader's sake. The first editions of *Grimm's Fairy Tales* contained gruesome details and dark twists that were edited out of later children's editions – the ones we heard growing up. Ultimately, we get to decide if we prefer the originals or the "cleaned-up" versions. They're just stories, so it's up to us.

But when it comes to the history of the King of Kings, it's important we don't leave anything important out. Today's passage is often lost when we study Jesus' birth. It definitely doesn't show up on our Christmas cards. Nobody builds a nativity scene out of the flight to Egypt or the wrath of King Herod. It's so scandalous we rarely talk about it. But tonight, I pray this part of the Christmas story will touch us and our relationship with Christ.

Last week, we studied the magi, foreign astrologers from Babylon, who came to worship Jesus. They stopped in at Jerusalem to ask where the messiah had been born and created a huge stir with King Herod, the man who'd bought the throne from Caesar. He was paranoid, killing three of his children and his wife over his fears that they'd take over. The magi went to Bethlehem, found Jesus, and then obeyed instructions in a dream to avoid Jerusalem and Herod.

About the same time, Joseph has a similar dream warning him about Herod's plans. The dream is so powerful that Joseph immediately gets up, packs up his family in the middle of the night, and they head south. Even if Jesus is a few months old by this time, this was a really unsettling dream if Joseph was willing to wake up an infant. You've been there; you know! Egypt wasn't a terrible place for Jews; there was a sizable community. But it was still foreign, hostile territory. The magi's gifts pay for a long journey and a stay in a country as refugees.

Then Herod enters the picture, and he reacts horribly when he figures out the magi aren't coming back. What has it been? A week? Two? We don't know, but Herod is so paranoid it couldn't have been long. In his fury, he orders all male children under two in the area of Bethlehem slaughtered. What is he thinking? He knew the census had been there, so hundreds of people were in town for a short period. He knew the child was likely gone. But he is so full of himself and so angry that he commands these deaths out of spite. He's a genuine monster.

Now we don't know how many families this affected. Based on the time and place, it was probably a dozen children, maybe a few more. It wasn't recorded by the historian Josephus, though he catalogued many incidents where Herod casually killed hundreds at a time. Herod wants to keep this quiet; if word gets out that he's tried to have the messiah killed, whether they believe the messiah has come or not, the people are going to want his head. But just because thousands weren't killed doesn't mean that it was any less horrific or scandalous.

Herod is brought to justice by God Himself. Herod dies alone and miserable, struck down by a terrible disease less than five days after murdering yet another of his sons. It doesn't bring those children back, but it does bring closure to that part of the story. But his son Archelaus is even worse; one of his first acts is to murder a group of three hundred people who asked for justice against the thugs who carried out his father's orders. Archelaus becomes so wicked that even Caesar is repulsed by him and removes him from power altogether!

Meanwhile, Jesus and His family are in Egypt. They are told in Joseph's dream that it is safe for them to return; Archelaus wasn't part of the conspiracy. But Joseph is very nervous about him. He's his father's son, and he rules over the southern part of the kingdom that includes Jerusalem and Bethlehem. It would have made sense for Joseph to want to have his son grow up near the holy city, to learn from the best rabbis, to be able to go to the temple often.

But that wasn't God's plan, and Joseph's fear leads them back to Nazareth, where he was from. Joseph unwittingly fulfills the prophetic words of the prophets when he does. Though none of the Scriptures mention Nazareth directly, there's a play on words – Jesus was the promised branch, the *nezer*, of David's kingly line. The messiah was also to be from nowhere – and Nazareth, out on the border, a city where the Romans had a garrison, a place where nobody wanted to be, had become a synonym for “nowhere” in Jewish culture.

But what does all of this say to us? Why is it here? It spoils the idea of a silent night, doesn't it? They were fleeing in the middle of the night! It's scary and overwhelming, not at all the portrait that we've seen since we were children. Parts of it break our hearts and make us question what God had in mind. What should we do with this?

Three things in this passage this week stood out to me. The first one is this: *the scandal of the flight to Egypt and the killing of the innocents remind us that Christmas is real, not just a myth*. Now the violence doesn't prove the truth of the story; we mentioned Grimm's Fairy Tales earlier, and those showed that ancient cultures were more tolerant of gruesome details than we are. But Matthew's details aren't necessary unless they really happened.

The passages of Scripture Matthew quotes weren't passages the scribes and teachers thought were about the Messiah. They were a part of God's plan, but nobody expected them. Matthew is most interested in showing us how Jesus is the perfect Moses, the greatest prophet of Israel. The language Matthew uses is lifted right out of the book of Exodus. And like Moses, Jesus saved when an order comes down to kill Hebrew babies. Like Moses, God brings Jesus out of Egypt. Like Moses, Jesus leads God's people out of slavery. But where Moses simply led the people out of Pharaohs' captivity, Jesus leads us out of our bondage to sin and death. But had Matthew left these parallels and prophecies out of his gospel – as Luke did – no one would be the wiser.

These passages mess up our picture postcard of Christmas. Our pictures of the nativity don't have the family fleeing at night with henchmen in hot pursuit. But this passage reminds us that even the more pleasant pictures we have don't tell the full story. We pass by the stench of the shepherds who haven't had a bath in weeks and the stable full of animals. We ignore the bizarre foreigners who are such an odd lot to honor the child. Our Christmas carols clean up the scandal. But tonight's passage leads us back into the scandal, back into the reality.

The myths of silent nights and babies not crying and Jesus smiling at drummer boys aren't evil; we won't stop singing those songs or reading those stories. But they aren't real. I love *Lord of the Rings* and *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *Harry Potter* and *Star Wars*, but they aren't real either. I can enjoy them. But while I might appreciate a legend, I really want what's real. I don't need a tearless baby cooing at a radiant Mary and Joseph in a stable with no dirt or grit or unpleasantness. I need more. I need the truth. I need God who in Jesus came into the muck and mire and violence and sin and depravity of our world to save us from it, to nail all of it to a cross thirty-three years later. I need the God who would stop at nothing to reunite His people with Himself and transform them from miserable sinners into His holy bride. I need the God of Moses to send One greater than Moses to our rescue. I need that. And so do you.

That leads me to my second thought about the scandal this week: *Jesus doesn't go from humble beginnings to impressive heights, which is His right as the King of Creation, but willingly goes lower and lower to become the servant of all*. We look at the scene in Bethlehem and think, "Boy, that was hard!" Mary makes a hard journey while very, very pregnant. No room for the family. Jesus placed in a manger. It's not a welcome befitting the King of Kings.

But that's just the beginning. When the family escapes to Egypt, it's another step down the ladder...exiles from their own homeland, refugees fleeing the sword, funded by the gifts of utter strangers, cut off for a time from going to the holy city and the temple where God was said to dwell with His people. When they finally are able to return, they are not welcomed as the family of the heir of the universe. They are close to outcasts.

Nazareth is up along the frontier of the northern country, home to a Roman garrison. Jesus probably did construction for the soldiers His countrymen despised. Roman soldiers were not known for their courtesy or their chastity. Jesus grew up seeing the decadence of the pagan world all around Him. His hometown was so despised that the first time his disciple Nathaniel heard of Him, his reaction was a familiar proverb – “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

If someday Jackson or Cameron want to go live abroad as exchange students or want to do overseas missions, you can bet I’d be researching it big time. I’d make sure they’re going with a reputable agency, that the place they’re staying is trustworthy, that all the details are perfect. I can’t control everything, and I wouldn’t want to, but I’d be doing my best to give them every opportunity and every advantage.

God didn’t do that with Jesus. Jesus came into this world in a lowly manger and his trajectory continued downward. He didn’t persevere through His life and become the perfect man because of His circumstances but in spite of them. He became the spotless lamb on our behalf despite all the hardships He suffered, despite all the opportunities for sin, and despite being seen as a man from a city of no account. He did all of that so that His sacrifice on the cross would be acceptable to His Father and account for the sins of all of His own that He would bring to Himself in faith.

Friends, the believer’s road with Jesus is a good one. It’s the road that leads to eternal life. We can find peace and joy and hope on that road. But it is not a road paved with dollar bills or big homes; it’s not paved with ease. It’s a path of service. It’s a path of becoming less so Jesus can become more in your life. It’s becoming a servant so that God can use you to do His will. It’s giving up the things of this world that don’t really matter for the things that will always matter. The scandal of Christmas is that Jesus kept moving down so that there was not a single person given to Him by the Father that He could not lift up to eternal life. The scandal of Christmas for each one of us is that the further we lower ourselves and do the Father’s will instead of our own, the closer we draw to God’s Son, born for us in Bethlehem.

Last thought about the scandal, the one that if you don’t get anything else, I want you to take home tonight: *Your response to Jesus is a matter of life and death.* Not just life and death in the here and now, but eternal life and eternal death. It’s that important.

The death of the innocents in Bethlehem is tragic. The church has always considered them to be the first Christian martyrs who died because of Jesus – and that God brought them to His side in paradise immediately. We believe God is sovereign and handled this despicable event in His perfect plan. Herod’s cruel tyranny did not surprise God. Herod faced God’s justice not long afterwards. As disturbing as the deaths in Bethlehem were, these were children of the covenant God made with Israel, too young to be responsible to the Jewish law for their actions and heirs of the promises of God to His people of Israel. Our loving God accepted them into His Kingdom; of that I have no doubt.

But on every page of the gospels, Jesus challenges people and brings them to a life and death decision. They respond either by believing Him and finding forgiveness in Him or by rejecting Him and condemning themselves in the process. On one page, we have the tax collector Zacchaeus turn to Jesus and be told that today he's been rescued and brought into the Kingdom. On another page, a rich young ruler turns away sad because he loves his wealth more than he loves God. Life and death follow closely after Jesus. Jesus heals the sick and brings the dead back to life. James and Stephen believe and they lose their lives spreading word of Jesus.

2 Corinthians 2 says that "through us God is spreading everywhere the knowledge of Himself...we are to God the aroma of Christ among those being saved and those who are perishing. To one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life." If you truly desire God, to hear of Jesus, the real Jesus, to know Him and love Him and be known by Him, this is all sweetness, even the bitterest parts like some of what we've heard tonight. But if you don't desire God, if you'd really not rather be bothered by Christ, then what I'm saying tonight is a stench. God gets in the way of what we want, our desires, our passions, ourselves. Is Jesus the aroma of life or death? It all depends on what's happening with your heart.

Every day, we make decisions. We decide what clothes to wear, what articles on the Internet to read, what emails to reply to, what people to text, what has to get done at work and at home, what shows we watch, how long we'll pray, how long we'll study our Bibles, how long we will serve in the name of Christ. To leave something undone by not deciding is still to have made a choice.

Don't let this season go by again without making a decision to make Jesus Lord of your life. If you made that decision long ago but you've let it slip by the wayside, if you've let the cares and concerns of life get in the way, it's not too late to get back on track. It's probably not going to matter tomorrow if you watch a great movie or read an interesting thriller today. But what you decide about Jesus today has eternal ramifications. Don't put it off again. It's too important. There's no better time than now to come to Him. And if your heart's not in the right place, if you want to believe but can't take that leap of faith, if there's anything in the way, I encourage you to pray about it. Talk to me about it. That's what I'm here for. I would be privileged to walk with you as you respond to Christ's invitation.

Christmas is a scandal. But it's real. It's good. It's a celebration that Christ became nothing so that we could inherit everything, even eternal life. Will you respond in faith and make this a Christmas worth remembering?