



# Central Peninsula Church

Catalog No. 1222  
Matthew 2:1-23  
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Dec. 23, 2001

## The Trouble With Christmas

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A couple of years ago NPR carried a story about plans to spruce up Bethlehem, the dusty little Palestinian town where Jesus was born. Over the years tourists have swarmed into Bethlehem. They take the short bus ride from Jerusalem, get off, and walk into the Church of the Nativity. They take pictures, get back on the bus, and head back for Jerusalem. The problem is they don't spend much money, so the Palestinian authorities made plans to make it more tourist friendly. They wanted to turn the dingy parking lot in front of the Church into a nice shopping center with boutiques, shops, and a luxury hotel. They even received over \$40 million dollars of international donations to help with the project. But there were problems; charges of political corruption, of money lining the pockets of politicians. The whole thing got bogged down in red tape. So much for a spruced up Bethlehem!

Of course, last December things were even worse in Bethlehem. After two months of fighting, Israeli soldiers in helicopter gunships fought a three-hour battle near Rachel's tomb. This came after two months of fighting which killed hundreds. As a result, there really was no Christmas last year in Bethlehem. There were few tourists and no pilgrims. Traditional events to celebrate the birth of Jesus were canceled. It's not much different this year.

Poor Bethlehem - a politically corrupt, bloody little town caught on the border between two warring peoples. It's hardly a place to celebrate Christmas. Let's face it, it's not a great year for celebrating anywhere. Somehow singing *Joy To The World* amid terrorist attacks, suicide bombs, children left fatherless and mothers left childless doesn't seem right. How can we celebrate Christmas when Bethlehem is just a small mirror of what is happening all over the world?

But what if I told you this morning that Bethlehem IS Christmas; that everything the Bible means by Christmas can be said in that one name, Bethlehem? Bethlehem, with all its hopes and all its fears is what Christmas is all about.

Our text this morning begins in Bethlehem. Matthew 2:1 says, "**Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of Herod the King...**"

Here in one sentence we have both the hope and the fear of Bethlehem. Jesus was born in Bethlehem. That's all we are told. No stable. No shepherds. No angels. But Matthew has already told us in chapter one that this Jesus is Savior and Messiah and King. There is plenty of hope in that. But there was another king in charge of Bethlehem, Herod, and that's not so hopeful. Before he died in 4 BC, Herod caused his share of fear. One of his political rivals had a drowning accident in three feet of water. When his favorite wife angered him, he had her strangled. He executed three of his own sons, and he ordered his own nobles to be massacred when he died just to ensure that there would be mourning rather than rejoicing. There is plenty of hope, but there is also plenty of fear in this one line.

The fact is that Herod's reaction to the birth of Jesus pretty much explains the fear...

### **I. Herod's reaction to the coming of Christ explains our fears.**

The story goes on and tells of how magi or what we call "wise men" came to Jerusalem, probably with a great entourage, and asked, "**Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star in the east and have come to worship him**" (v. 2). Magi were pagan astrologers whose divinatory skills were respected all over the near east. They believed that falling stars predicted the fall of rulers and rising stars the coming of new ones. Emperors feared signs like these. You can imagine why Herod reacted the way he did. Verse 3 says, "**When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.**" Herod was troubled because of the possibility of a rival; the people were troubled because they knew how Herod might react.

The first thing Herod did was gather the religious scholars of his day and ask about the predicted birthplace of the one the Jews called the Messiah, the coming King. It might appear that Herod was sincere in his quest for the truth, but we know better. They dug out an old prophecy from the scroll of Micah. They brought the scroll to Herod and said, "**In Bethlehem of Judea; for this is what has been written by the prophet: 'And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the leaders of Judah; for out of you will come forth a ruler who will**

shepherd my people Israel” (vv. 5-6). Micah predicted Bethlehem as the new king’s birthplace because he was to be a descendant of David and Bethlehem was David’s hometown.

Any genuine seeker of truth would have gone to Bethlehem himself, but Herod stayed home and schemed instead. He secretly gathered the magi, found out more about the time the star appeared, and sent them off to Bethlehem to find the child and report back to him so he too could come and worship him (vv. 7-8). Even in Herod’s day religious devotion was the guise for violence and terror. I think the magi smelled a rat. Verse 9 says, **“After hearing the king, they went their way; and the star which they had seen in the east, went on before them until it stood over the place where the Child was.”** It was the star they continued to follow, not Herod’s instructions. And when they saw the Child with his mother they fell to the ground and worshipped him and gave him gifts fit for a king. And it turns out God was looking out for these men. That night one of them had a dream in which he was warned not to return to Herod, so they left for home by a different route.

Meanwhile Herod waited and when he figured out that his scheme failed he turned Bethlehem into a bloodbath. You know the story. Instead of reading what the Scripture says happened next, I want you to see it. I think this film clip from *Jesus of Nazareth* captures the tragedy very well.

## **II. We live in a world much like the one Jesus was born into.**

I know that’s not a very nice thing to see at Christmas time, but Matthew doesn’t give us much of a choice. I mean, Christmas is barely 12 verses old and he inserts this horror story of King Herod’s massacre in Bethlehem. Threatened by a possible rival, he decides to stand up and act like a king and has all the boy babies slaughtered.

The real story of Bethlehem shows us what happens when someone comes along and threatens our own kingdoms, whether they be political or personal. Herod was right in a way. This Child was a threat. He is a King. He threatens all of us. That’s why leaders like Hitler and Mao and Stalin and Milosovich and Bin Laden do the things they do. That’s why individuals like you and me react with such rage when we feel our own rights are being infringed on. He threatens our hold on our lives.

What a contrast to our cherished views of

Christmas! Maybe that’s why when I shopped at Longs for Christmas cards the other day I could hardly find one that mentioned Christ. Maybe the world knows better than we do. You bring Christ in and things get messy. We sing, “Oh little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie.” If that’s all we sing, WE lie! Oh little town of Bethlehem, how panicked, how soaked in blood, how grief stricken we see thee lie. We walk around the mall in the days before Christmas and everyone seems so cheery. But if we just turn down the Musak for a moment we might hear Rachel weeping for her children.

In a way, the Bible is always doing this sort of thing. It’s always ripping away our idealism. We would have liked the story of David a lot better if he didn’t kill so many Philistines. The story of Abraham would have made a lot more sense if he didn’t raise his knife to kill his own son. We would have appreciated Moses a lot more if he didn’t make the people of Israel guzzle the smolten remains of the golden calf. We would have had more Sunday School lessons on the book of Acts if Ananais and Saphira didn’t drop dead after holding back a few dollars they’d promised for the offering plate. The Bible is always doing this. It’s always popping our bubble.

The church does that too. When I first became a Christian I was the happiest 17-year-old alive. I felt so much love for everyone around me. I just wanted them to know the Jesus I knew; the One who forgave all my sins. And then I went to church and my first Sunday at Peninsula Bible Church they had to bring up the subject of a male youth leader who had been seducing teenage boys in the youth group. Everything was fine until I went to church!

But it’s not just the Bible, and it’s not just the church, it’s life. Life itself has a way of popping our bubbles. Maybe that’s why this year, if we’re honest, we understand the real Bethlehem better than ever. If we listen, we can still hear the the weeping in New York and Washington. If we listen really carefully we can even hear it in Afghanistan and Palestine where children are caught in the middle of threatened grown ups.

We can hear the weeping in abortion clinics and halfway houses and prisons and families broken by divorce and the growing rate of unemployment.

I can hear it in my friend’s house. Just three weeks ago he and his five children buried his 47-year-old wife after a six month battle with leukemia. There is a lot of weeping in that house this Christmas. I can hear it in the couple who buried their nine-year-old son a little over a year ago. They still weep, especially at Christmas.

I have to tell you, I think the real story of Bethlehem

is much more true to life. You see, even though this may not be the Christmas story that we want, it very well may be the one that we need, because any Christmas story that is unwilling to deal with the sometimes painful and tragic reality of life is not worth celebrating. I believe this true story of Christmas is actually brimming with hope. Amidst the weeping, I see hope smeared all over this story and that gives me hope for my story.

### III. Despite the tragedies of our world, there's still reason to hope.

**A. God reveals himself to surprising people:** I see a reason to hope in the example of the wise men. Remember these guys were from far away. They weren't Jews. They weren't part of God's chosen people. For what it's worth, they were Arabs. We would have expected the people of Jerusalem to rejoice at the Messiah's birth, but they were troubled right along with Herod. We would have expected the religious leaders to run to Bethlehem, but they stayed in Jerusalem with Herod. Institutional religion doesn't come out real well in this story. Instead we have these Arabs running to Bethlehem and rejoicing at the sight of the Christ child. There is hope in that.

There is hope because we see what great lengths God will go to chase down those whom he is calling. They were astrologers! The Bible condemns astrology! Yet God was willing to use even their study of the stars to reveal himself. You just can't put God in a box. He'll always break your rules. He'll always surprise you. He will go to great lengths to reveal himself. He will stoop to what we can understand.

We can hope because God still reveals himself in surprising ways to the most surprising people. Don't count anyone out! Don't count yourself out. There are people here this morning and you are not sure why you are here. You don't think of yourself as religious. But things have been happening that you can't explain. You feel drawn to reach out for more. I want you to know that God himself is the One who draws you. He can reveal himself to you through a bird or a book or a boyfriend. The key is for you to listen and run to Bethlehem and find the Child we call Jesus. Ann Weens writes:

In each heart lies a Bethlehem,  
an inn where we must ultimately answer  
whether there is room or not.  
When we are Bethlehem bound  
we experience our own advent in his.  
When we are Bethlehem bound  
we can no longer look the other way  
conveniently not seeing stars  
not hearing angel voices.

We can no longer excuse ourselves by busily tending our sheep or our kingdoms.

Amidst the tragedy of Bethlehem there is hope. There is hope because the hound of heaven is still on the chase. He is still revealing himself in surprising ways to surprising people. Sometimes he even uses the pain and the tragedy and the sense of hopelessness to bring us to his Son.

**B. God is still able to protect his people:** But that's not all. I see hope in this story because God is ever able to protect his people. He protected the magi by warning them in a dream not to return to Herod. He protected Joseph, Mary and Jesus as an angel 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 going to search for the Child to destroy him"** (v. 13). Poor Herod! He didn't know what he was up against! He thought his little plan was a secret, but the God of the universe knew his plan and protected his people.

We say, "Well, God doesn't always protect his people." He let so many of his people die in New York. He let Jewish teenagers die in the disco that was bombed at midnight. Palestinian Christians die in Israeli air raids. My friend's wife who died of cancer was a devoted Christ-follower.

Does God really protect his people? We see rock solid evidence right here in this passage that he can and he does. We point out the times he doesn't prevent death or suffering; we fail to have eyes to see how often he does. How many more might have been in the World Trade Center? How many called in sick that day? How often has he caused cancer cells to stop reproducing in our bodies?

It's true, there are times God seems to withhold his hand of protection. We don't always know why. It's futile to try to figure it out. But when the psalmist says, **"He keeps us in life, and does not allow our feet to slip,"** I take that at face value (Ps. 66:9). When Jesus says I shouldn't fear because God has numbered the very hairs on my head, I take that to mean he will protect me.

Amidst the seeming chaos and the randomness with which tragedy and evil seem to strike, we can hope because God still protects his people. And even if he chooses to let us die, we know that if we have trusted his Son we never really die, because we are

immediately transferred to our heavenly home.

**C. God's plan is still being carried out:** But there is still more. I see hope in this story because whether we live or die God is still carrying out his perfect plan. Three times we see his plan being carried out through prophecy being fulfilled.

God had written seven hundred years earlier through the prophet Micah that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. Through an unlikely series of events that brought Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem because of a census, Jesus was born in Bethlehem rather than Nazareth. God's plan was fulfilled in that.

Around the same time the prophet Hosea wrote, **"Out of Egypt I called my son"** (Hos. 11:1). Of course, Israel had come out of Egypt years earlier. That was symbolic of how Christ would have to flee to Egypt and then later come out and settle in Nazareth. Pharaoh had tried to destroy the Hebrews in Egypt. Herod, a new Pharaoh, tried to kill Jesus, and in his rage he slaughtered the other innocent children of Bethlehem. Eventually, Moses brought the children of Israel out of the land of bondage and death, but Jesus was to bring his people out of a worse bondage and a worse death. Jesus is cast here as Moses' successor. This was part of God's plan.

The most amazing prophecy fulfilled is that which came through the prophet Jeremiah - **"Rachel weeping for her children."** Rachel had died in childbirth in Bethlehem (Gen. 48:7). Jacob buried her there. You can visit Rachel's tomb in Bethlehem today. Jeremiah saw Jewish exiles being hauled off to Babylon. They would have pass by Rachel's tomb and so he says, "Rachel is weeping for her children." Here in this story she is weeping again as innocent baby boys are murdered.

Matthew is telling us that even this is somehow fulfilling God's plan.

Even the pain and tragedy of our world and of our lives is fulfilling God's plan. We don't understand how, but it does. He doesn't cause the evil. He doesn't make the Herods of our world act as they do to fulfill his plan. But he does redeem that evil and somehow uses it to accomplish his greater purpose. There is hope in that. Nothing that happens to you and nothing that happens to me can thwart his plan.

**D. God entered into the tragedy:** Maybe the greatest sign of hope in this story is that God himself was willing to come to Bethlehem. You see, if God is going to save us, if God is going to rescue us, he'll have to come down in order to do it. We can not get up to God ourselves. We're not strong enough or holy enough; he has to come down. And that's what he did. He came all the way down to Bethlehem.

The apostle John wrote about this. He wrote: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God...And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." We call that the incarnation - the mystery and miracle of God visiting our planet as a real man, even living within the limitations of a man. And he did it so we could make it up to God. This is Matthew's way of saying the same thing. John says, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." Matthew just says he came down to Bethlehem.

Jesus came down to real people living on this real place we call earth. It's not always a very pretty place. As we try to hold onto our little kingdoms, people get hurt. Sometimes there is blood. But Jesus knows all about that as well. Herod slaughtered the innocents in Bethlehem, but just up the road was a place called Calvary. In that place, just a few years later, another innocent was slaughtered. It seemed that finally Herod got his way with Mary's baby. But we know this was all planned. Through his death on the cross all the tragedy and fear of Bethlehem will be conquered - your sin, my sin, even Herod's sin. There's hope in that.

## CONCLUSION

I think the writer of *Oh Little Town of Bethlehem* got it right after all. After singing of its stillness, its deep and dreamless sleep, we sing, "in thy DARK streets shineth the everlasting light. The hopes and FEARS of all the years are met in thee tonight." There is a lot of fear in Bethlehem, but there's a lot of hope as well.

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