

The Birth of the Infant Lord

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We have been hearing, I suppose, very much, and hearing quoted and read and printed, that second chapter of Matthew which we read together earlier in the service, and I shall not read it again. But I do want to talk from it this Sunday.

Now, the second of Matthew gives us the story of the birth of the infant Lord. This story is the wonder story of all lands and all ages, and as told by Luke, it is said to be, and I believe is, the most beautiful story in human language. And as told by Matthew, it is beautiful but terrible as well.

For there are three unexpressed facts that explain the chapter, facts that are not here, but that explain it. They are the setting for the chapter, they are that which go before and goes after, and makes it intelligible to intelligent minds. There are these three things, the total moral and spiritual disaster which had engulfed the human race.

Now, we cannot think of the coming of our Savior to the world apart from this. As well, think of a rescue ship going out to rescue those who had not been shipwrecked, as well send a doctor to a place where there had been no accident and no epidemic. This was a rescue. This is the story of a rescue, not a rescue team, but one who came alone to rescue mankind.

And thus fulfilled, and that's the second unexpressed fact here, thus fulfilled God's ancient purpose in sovereign grace, the sending of a Rescuer, a Savior is the word we use, and it means the same thing, to the world to redeem men who had been caught in this disaster and engulfed in this woe.

And the third is the black malice, the cold fury of the one we call Satan the Destroyer. You and I, all we human beings, we're adepts at the business of presenting one side of a question. And all through this rather happy Christmas season, there is but one side presented. It's the side of the golden bells and the angels who said, peace on earth, goodwill to men.

But I say these unexpressed facts make all this intelligible to mortal men. The evil, the fury loosed against God and against his son, and through God to humankind, or should I say, loosed against humankind and through humankind against God. For it was not the devil's fury or anger at mankind that caused him to be the devil he is, but it is his anger with God. And since mankind was made in the image of God and God has expressed and did express his great love for mankind, then it was to get at God that the devil attacked that race of beings which God had loved the most.

And so, we have in this chapter, and I want you to think of the entire chapter and not one text out of it, but here we have in this chapter events that are solemn and fearful and breathtaking. We have a view of life inside and outside, and we have a view of the human race and of the religious world and of the irreligious world of the Jewish world

and of the pagan world, of the temple and the armory, of the priest and the soldier, all here. And we have this view of yesterday and an explanation of today and a preview of tomorrow.

Now there are ten persons or groups of persons which I shall sketch very briefly. They are Jesus and Mary and the wise men, and Herod the king and the people of Jerusalem and the chief priests, and the soldiers and Joseph and the slaughtered innocents and Rachel weeping for her children. Here they are either individuals or they are groups.

And we begin, of course, where we should begin, with Jesus, the seed of the woman, the star of Jacob, which had come out of the ancient past, whom Moses and all the prophets did write to fulfill the ancient Scriptures.

And then there was Mary, simple, plain, lovely little Mary. I have combed over my memory, and I cannot remember or recall but three times that Mary ever spoke during her entire life, her entire ministry, her holy ministry here in the New Testament.

There might be one or two added which I have for the moment overlooked. But I can think only where Mary spoke to the angel once and to her son a couple of times, and perhaps one or two times more, but certainly no more, this quiet, simple woman who glorified herself by doing the one thing that women are fitted to do. She obeyed and she bore a son, and thus in her womanhood she became most honored among women. And for this we honor her, and for this we love her, and we remember her, and we shall meet her, and meekly we shall thank her for saying, be it unto me even as thou wilt.

So that we have Mary here, and we talk so much about both Jesus and Mary that I'm not going to this morning to say too much about them. But we have them linked here, Jesus born of Mary, and Mary the mother of Jesus' flesh, who prepared within her the sacred precincts of her own holy body, that body which God prepared for Jesus as a sacrifice to bleed on a cross.

Well, then we come to the other group, the wise men. Now I don't know how many there were. Whatever tradition says, usually off little, and the tradition says that there were three, and that they represented the three major races of mankind. That I do not know. I suppose that it is simply an idea which got into somebody's head. But whether there were three or whether there were a dozen, we know something about these wise men. They were the learned pagan religionists of high position in their country, but humble and meek and childlike.

There is a feeling that people in high religious position cannot be spiritual, and there is another feeling that people of great learning cannot be spiritual. And here were men, however many, and they were learned, I say, and had high position there, and were known as the Magi.

The old man of God Milton called them the star-led wizards, meaning it in its pure and not in its modern evil sense. And they were humble and meek and childlike. And though they had their high position, and though they were learned so that even the Holy Scriptures called them wise, still they were humble enough and meek enough and childlike enough in their spirit to come inquiring where the king of the Jews should be born that they might worship him.

And here is one of the sweet mysteries of the past, one of the riddles of history. There isn't any reason or use for our looking it up in any of the books, because nobody knows any more about it than is found in the books of the New Testament, particularly Matthew the second chapter.

So, though you may read chapter after chapter about these men in commentaries and books of religious instruction, it is being spun like a spider's web out of the living stuff of the writer and has no basis at all. But we do know from this chapter that we're dealing with this morning that their acts revealed a certain inner beauty here about these men. They had great knowledge, certainly, and their human hearts hungered after God.

And ought not this to prove that no matter how wise we may be or how learned or how high in religion we may be, we still have a heart, and if that heart hungers after God, then we do well to follow the wise men. And their frank simplicity and delicate wisdom are revealed here, and their discretion. They outsmarted Herod, but of course we understand that they did not do it of themselves, but they did it by the illumination of God who told them what to do.

Now these wise men from the East are a type of all the humble great who bow before our Lord, and there have been many. Paul in an outburst once said, You see your calling, brethren, that not many wise men and not many noble and not many mighty or great are in the kingdom of God, but God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the mighty.

That's a familiar passage which I'll not finish quoting. But while Paul said that, he did not say there are not any noble, nor did he say there are not any wise, nor did he say there are not any mighty. He had an "m" on before "any." He said not many. He didn't say there were not any, but simply that there were not many.

There are still a few who managed to get past the obstacle of their own learning. There is, I suppose, nothing quite such a temptation to man or quite as likely to become an idol to him as his own learning. A man feels that he's intellectual, he will worship that intellect of his, and his very education will prevent him from saying too much about it to the public, because his very culture and training will help him to disguise his egotism and his self-love.

But this wise wisdom of men is a great obstacle, but nevertheless there have been a few that have gotten past it, a few that have gotten through and in great humility bow before the Son of God. They were the wise men who came as samples of all the wise men who should come down the years. They have not been many but thank God there have been some.

And then also here parading across the stage of history and letting us see him operate and letting us look through his transparent skin to the heart of the man, we have Herod, the king of Judea, the ambitious man. Here was another great man. Here were great men, and if these three kings from Orient are, were kings indeed, then they stood on the level with Herod, the king of Judea.

But the king Herod was ambitious and desired to reign and perpetuate his line, and he wanted to be known as the founder of the dynasty, the Herodian dynasty, and thus he feared any rival. And in his fear, he became as cunning as the serpent and as cruel as the grave. Yonder in hell where Herod is, they'll hiss him, and maybe they're hissing him now as an infanticide, a murder of babies.

And then there were the people of Jerusalem. That's my kind. I don't belong up among the wise men of the East, nor certainly don't belong in the courts of kings, but here were the people of Jerusalem. And now you're talking to my kind of people, the simple plain people who lived their lives and married and beget children and saw them grow up and saw some of them die and were disappointed and overtaxed and literally in more ways than one overtaxed and distressed and troubled. These were the plain people of Jerusalem.

They had small knowledge, and they didn't have too much faith and they were more or less at the mercy of events, and you and I are. We can listen to the broadcast, and we can hear what has been pronounced from Washington or London, and when it's all over, you and I have to accept it, whether we agree with it or not. We are the people of Jerusalem, the plain people, and we're troubled somewhat.

And they were afraid of civil war in those days. They were afraid to be too hostile toward the hated occupiers, those who came in, the Romans. They were afraid because they feared civil war that should result in deportation of multitudes and the mass murder of many others. And here were the people of Jerusalem at the mercy of events.

And my friends, the people of Chicago are like them now. The people of Chicago listen to the pronouncements of kings and great men, and then they go their troubled way. Then they go to a show or do something else to try to sort of forget that they're troubled and in distress and are fearing war, that they haven't much knowledge and they haven't much faith and are at the mercy of the dance of circumstance. They try to forget it. And here they were, these people of Jerusalem.

But do you know who it was that Jesus came to save? Those very people of Jerusalem. And they were the ones who in large numbers he did save. Jesus was here and Mary was here, his mother and the wise man and Herod and the people of Jerusalem.

And the king now and again came, but the common people heard him gladly. And then here were the chief priests and scribes, and they were the Jewish religionists of their day. And they knew the letter of the ancient prophecies and no doubt had memorized it so they could quote easily. And yet they were blind to the presence of the fulfillment of the Scriptures, easy tools of scheming politicians.

You know, if you stand for truth in a day when error is in the saddle, you are likely to be considered somewhat odious and even churlish. I suppose the rock that stands there a hundred feet out from the shore and feels the frothy billows beat over it for a hundred years, I suppose it's one of the most unpopular things on all the shore for a hundred miles around. Because if waves and billows and storms had intelligence and sentience, no doubt they would hate that rock, for the rock stands solid and the waves break and break and break again.

But still the rock stands, and it's necessary that certain people have to stand like that and refuse to be in any day the tools of the scheming politicians. And yet they try to use the church, the church of Christ which you purchased with His own blood, that divine organism, that household of God, that temple of the Holy Ghost, that dwelling place of the Deity, that new creation born out of stress and pain.

That church of Christ is being used wherever it can be used by the scheming politicians, men who hate the God that they so gently and silkily and smoothly talk about when they want to get elected. My brethren, let's remember that the church of Christ stands alone like Peter's sheet let down, separated from and completely divorced from everything around about her. And it's tragic when she allows herself to be the tool, the utensil of men who have no higher ambition than to get themselves elected.

So, Herod sent for the chief priests and the scribes. Now if the chief priests and the scribes had had the gift of the Holy Spirit, if they had understood, if they had known, and if they had not wanted to curry favor with the king, they would have met and had a little prayer meeting and said, we'll never tell that old butcher, we'll never tell him anything. He hates us, he hates God, he hates the Messiah to come, he hates.

And so, we're not going to put into the hands of a hateful man any prophecy. And they would never have told him anything. They'd have talked for an hour and said nothing, and they'd have gotten around him somehow, or they'd have flatly refused and taken persecution, even martyrdom, rather than to play into the hand of Herod the butcher.

The chief priests and scribes who know the Bible but don't know God, they can be expected to turn up on the side of some weird things. When Hitler came to power, some preachers turned up on his side, and now some are on the side of Tito, and others on the side of Khrushchev. It's amazing, it's shocking, it's sickening what preachers and priests and scribes and rabbis will do to curry favor with men in power.

Well, there they are, the people of Jerusalem. God said nothing against them, they were just trouble, that's all. Poor people who didn't know much, and were simple and plain, hardworking, and ate their plain fare and slept well, and got up and went to work again. They were the plain people, and nothing said against them. But there were the chief priests and the scribes, and they played into the hand of the ambitious and cruel king. Then there were the soldiers of Herod.

Now, I don't know how you feel about the soldiers of Herod, but I rather pity them. The soldiers are always present, always there, and they've got to be there, at the time when some president or king or prime minister or dictator suddenly decides that he's angry enough to fight. And then a thousand miles from the front line, he sits in his mahogany table while the boys, they call the soldiers, go out and do the dying.

It's always been that way, and I suppose it always will be that way. Only five hundred, they said, English died when they sent their soldiers into Egypt. Only five hundred. Five hundred tall English boys who dropped their H's and slurred their A's and loved their parents and their sweethearts and their kids back home. They had to go and be butchers, and it's always so. Evil, ambitious men in the halls of state plan their cunning and cruel plans, and then at a wave of their hand and a crook of their thumb, they send the hired boys out, or the boys who have to go, fellows who don't want to go, and force

them to revolting atrocities which all their Christian teaching and all their civilized humanity revolts against.

And then there was Joseph. He appears here too. Good, honest, dull, faithful, plain, obedient Joseph, the husband of Mary. He had to be a good man to be the husband of Mary for a number of reasons. He had to be much older than she, for he knew her not until she brought forth her firstborn son. He had to be . . . what word should I use to be fair to the facts and yet not be condemned as being unkind? He had to be a dull fellow, and he had to be good enough and obtuse enough that he would marry a girl several months pregnant and accept as the explanation that the Holy Ghost had come upon her and the power of the Most High had overshadowed her, which was, of course, the truth.

But if Joseph hadn't been simple enough and dull enough and old enough and faithful enough and obedient enough, he'd have hit the ceiling when he discovered the condition. But the good, faithful, honest Joseph, they put a hoop around his head, a luminous hoop, and made him a saint. And I guess he's as much of a saint as any of the rest, but I thank God for Joseph, the husband of Mary. Not the father of Jesus, but the husband of Mary, who bore the Son of God. And so, we have Joseph here.

I'm not sure, friends, but what the world would be better off if we had more simple, faithful, obedient, plain people and fewer brilliant people. I'm not sure but what in the church of Christ, the Quakers and the Mennonites and the Brethren in Christ and the plain people, and the Brethren of the Friends of God and the Brethren of the Burning Heart and the simple people who dress plain and live plain. I'm not sure but what they came nearer being true followers of Christ than the brilliant and the shining and the incandescent who have come down the years. We thank God for them.

We sing the hymns of all the bright ones. We read the devotional books of the superior ones. We read the sermons and the theology of the great Thomas Aquinas and the Lutherans and the rest. But I'd feel more at home among people like Joseph. Nobody ever was afraid to go into Joseph's presence, great big rough hands and hairy arms with sawdust in it on his arms until he washed up at night. Who could smile and with a faraway look in his eyes wonder about the boy and yet never question it seriously what this boy was born different from other boys and raise no trouble about it. Thank God for Joseph.

And then there was the slaughter. There were the slaughtered innocents in this chapter too. For here we have a panoramic view. Here are the slaughtered innocents. It looks as if it had been a popular sport from the days of ancient times to kill Jews, doesn't it? Here were the babies of Jewish blood, unfortunate enough in the long sweep of the ages to be born here in this tight squeeze of circumstance where the Son of God had been born and where an ambitious and murderous king was on the throne.

And so, the soldiers went out and among the dying, screaming terror, these little ones gave up their lives with no one to help them but binding God to avenge them forever and forever and forever. Herod and Satan, they may well tremble for not all the chanting of the angels, peace on earth, goodwill to men, not all the declaration of the love of God for mankind, and not all the dying and bleeding of the Savior will ever balance the scales to take care of these.

They may well tremble for there is judgment ahead and justice, and the God who is good is also a just God, and the God who gave his Son to die also said that there should be a judgment when the sea should give up its dead in the earth, and they should come from the north and south and east and west and be judged for the deeds done in the body.

So, you may relax, Herod, the day is coming, and the blind chief priests and scribes and the butchers of the king, the day is coming, and these little babes under two years of age that were slaughtered innocently there. And you know what I believe, and I can't give you the text and I don't know, but I tell you what I believe.

I believe that every one of these little lambs who died with the bayonets through a tiny baby chest, every one of them is gathered around the throne of God now, and every one of them is there and will be there, all of them, for the Savior for whom, in a sense, they died, afterward died for them. And not having sins that they had committed, not having reached the age of accountability, the broad mantle of Jesus' atonement covers all those little babes. Whether they were baptized or not, or whether they were born into a Christian home or not, means nothing.

Then there was Rachel, and that's the last, Rachel weeping for her children. Now, Rachel wasn't anybody. Rachel was a symbolic name for all Judah's mothers, all the mothers whose eyes protruded in terror and who stifled in their throat the scream that rose when they saw their innocent baby boy, who had never yet more than said, Mama and Papa, and who had never done an evil, saw him go down in his blood before the butchers of Herod.

And every wail that went up all the region roundabout is all gathered up here, and the great God who gathers tears in his bottles, and who gathers in his great heart the weepings and the wailings of his children, said Rachel was weeping for her children. And this is a symbolic name for all the world's sorrowing mothers. Mother, God hears your prayers, and God sees your tears, and God knows your grief.

Now, how fantastic, how fantastic that when God would send his Son to die for us and rise and redeem us, that man's hateful answer should be stealth and deception and flight and escape and tears and sorrow and anguish and death. We're worse than God said we were, dear friends, and we need a Redeemer. How bad we need a Redeemer. And because this is a picture of the world, this second chapter of Matthew, a picture of the world, how bad we need a Redeemer.

And how penitent we ought to be this time, when we have spent more money than we can afford and when we'll get presents we don't need. But one thing Christmas does for us down on our human level, it brings our families together. We can look on the faces of our loved ones, but let us not allow the joys of fellowship and social communion to blind us to the fact that when God sent his Son, man's response was stealth and deception and flight and tears and sorrow and death.

And it's still so in this awful age in which we live. They have a tree on the White House lawn, and Ike and his family's going to lunch or dine together, and I'm glad that it's so. I'm glad for the four little Eisenhowers that are going to come tumble all over happy-faced old Ike there in Washington.

But good a man as he is, he doesn't know what to do about all this. Wise men and ambitious kings and stupid, plain people like us and chief priests and scribes and religious men who ought to know better. And the butchers of kings and the dying of babies in Hungary, good honest man, but he doesn't know what to do.

And they don't know in London, and they don't know in Berlin, and they don't know anywhere. Penitence becomes us this Christmas season, dear friends, penitence becomes us. And the star that shone over Bethlehem has been darkened by a cloud that rises from human breasts, clouds of sorrow and anguish and fear.

And so, while we rejoice together, we ought to rejoice with trembling and kiss the Son lest He be angry and we perish from the earth when His anger is kindled but a little. Amen.