

ADVENT: WEEK FOUR

day 23

*Slaughter of the Innocents*  
*(Expectations and Redemption)*

Matthew 2:13-18



Jesus came into a brutal, violent world. No one was safe, especially Jews. In the year 4 B.C. (Jesus was born between 6-4 B.C), Roman General Varus put down a revolt in the Greek city of Sepphoris, only 3 ½ miles from Nazareth, Jesus' hometown. Varus burned it to the ground, along with a nearby city called Emmaus. Jesus knew these places well as a child. Varus had a scorched earth policy, and he crucified 2000 men at one time in Sepphoris. This is what it was like to grow up in the Galilee region in the first century.

But even more to the point of what the world was like that first Christmas is the story we find in today's reading. This takes place when a homicidal maniac known as Herod the Great finds out that there is a baby who might be a threat to his rule. All he knows is that the baby is living somewhere on the outskirts of Jerusalem, so he sends out soldiers to find and slaughter every baby boy who is two years old or younger. The brutality of that act (known to history as The Slaughter of the Innocents) is almost impossible to fathom. We have unfortunately had much experience of the slaughter of the innocents in our own culture, through both mass abortion and the terrible attacks on school children that have occurred over the past four decades. But, in some ways, what Herod did was far worse. Matthew says that the prophecy of Jeremiah was literally fulfilled, that is, there was literally a cry heard in Ramah. The town of Ramah was about twelve miles from Bethlehem, located on the other side of Jerusalem. In other words, this massacre wasn't just confined to one locale. It was widespread. It was, literally, overkill...with screaming fathers having their little ones ripped from their arms, children shrieking, mothers wailing, and babies being thrown lifeless to the floor.

That was Christmas. THAT'S what Jesus was born into...a horrible, brutal, bloody, vicious environment. He tasted the same brutality those school children experienced in recent shootings. He knew the gut-wrenching loss of loved ones and friends at the hands of evil and homicidal men. He felt at a deep, personal level the crushing weight of a sinful society collapsing in on itself. He felt it all. Literally. Thirty-three years after His birth as He hung on a cross bearing the sins and sickness of the entire human race.

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All of that seems to call into question the validity of the angels' message to the shepherds. The coming of Jesus was supposed to be "good news of great joy which is for all the people." But the immediate aftermath of His arrival was one of the most vile and bloodthirsty acts in history. And the succeeding centuries weren't much better!

But this is one of the most difficult, yet important, lessons of Advent: expectations of what redemption will look like, and when it will materialize, must be left in the hands of an all-wise and loving God. Looking back from the advantage of two millenia, we can see with amazing clarity just how radically the birth of Jesus changed our world for the better. We even see how used the evil Roman empire for His purposes as the gospel spread across the globe. Our job is not to understand that which we cannot understand about the ways and timing of God. Our job is to do what the shepherds did, and Mary and Joseph did, and Simeon and Anna did...our job is to rejoice in the promise of redemption while we await the fulfillment of it. Yes, our joy is sometimes interrupted by weeping, our hope tainted by suffering. But we choose to rejoice because the God Who loved us enough to join us on the sin-racked planet can be trusted to fulfill His beautiful and redemptive purposes for our lives. Glad tidings, indeed!

prayer:



***Lord Jesus, thank You for volunteering to enter the sordid confines of a fallen world. Thank You for bringing into this brokenness the glorious hope and promise of redemption. Help me to be more overwhelmed by Your faithful presence than I am by the grief and evil of this world. Make me, by Your Spirit, a source of grace and hope amid the darkness of our age. In Jesus' name, amen.***

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