

## AFTER EPIPHANY . . . THE REST OF THE STORY

We usually consider the Bethlehem visitations over and done with when the Magi depart. Matthew's narrative is not finished, however. It continues with an account of a *third visitation* to Bethlehem that is never included in our Christmas plays or cards. We could call it after the old, syndicated Paul Harvey program, *The Rest of the Story*. It is a rude interruption of *Joy to the World*, and it slaps us in the spiritual face.

*Then Herod when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under . . .(Matthew 2: 16)*

Listening to the account of the *Slaughter of the Innocents* is the spiritual equivalent to the sound of fingernails raking across a black board. It is hard to listen to, and it raises both irritation and consternation. Who approved such a distraction from the warmth and good feeling of the *Twelve Days of Christmas*? Well, God did. While recording the peaceful and endearing images of the Christmas and Epiphany visitations, God thought it also fitting to rub our noses in the rest of the story about a third visitation where the little town of Bethlehem witnesses a horrible slaughter of innocent children. And while this rest of the story is rarely a part of how we present Epiphany, God saw fit to include it as a continuation of His narrative.

We sing of *peace on earth and mercy mild*, but where are such lovely things to be found amid such gut-wrenching events? For some, the idea of peace simply means the cessation of hostilities - everyone just getting along. This, however, is not God's understanding of peace. From the Divine perspective, peace is a matter of being connected to the Prince of Peace and His saving work; and doing so *in the midst* of great hostilities. *The rest of the story* connected with Epiphany teaches us that when God's peace advances, spiritual warfare against the powers of darkness does not decline. It always increases. To put it another way, when God's peace is about to reign supreme in this fallen world, someone is going to die.

The slaughter of the innocents and the flight into Egypt signal that the peace of God is being set in motion toward a final showdown against the powers of evil. Jesus is the *Prince of Peace* (Isaiah 9:6) Who brings with Him the peace of God. He is spared Herod's wrath so that one day He might receive the wrath of God. He will grow in wisdom and stature and made ready to receive the condemnation of the Father on Calvary's cross. The innocent children died in the place of Jesus, so the innocent Jesus could die in the place of all of us. With that, God's peace on earth is executed and the forces of darkness are defeated. The Epiphany of God-with-us moves on in the rest of the story to the greater manifestation of God-for-us. The cross of Christ is the climax of his saving work that established the peace of God and good will toward men.

The presence and working of none other than the Devil himself were behind Herod and his mad treachery. The Word made flesh would dwell for a time in Egypt to be kept safe from Herod and the wiles of the Devil. As we see Jesus weak and helpless according to his human nature, the Heavenly Father treats his infant Incarnate Son in a way that makes sense to us as we would reflect on how love would care for little ones. He sees that the baby Jesus is protected and taken out of harm's way. He warns Joseph about the impending danger and instructs the family to be moved to the safe confines of Egypt. The family is cared for with the tribute of the wise men which serves as the means of support while in exile until the coast is clear for a return to Nazareth. But we must struggle with the slaughter of the innocent babes who are left behind in Bethlehem. We are without answers to our anguished questions of *why* - not when we see the deliverance from harm's way by the Lord - but rather when we don't. Babies of this world would die instead of the baby Jesus. They should be seen as the first martyrs in the Church.

There are parallels here between how the Father treated his only begotten incarnate Son, and how He treats his adopted sons in Christ. In both instances, He treats the very young and helpless as babes. Sometimes as with the babes in Bethlehem, he calls them to Himself through the violence that takes their lives. We see the same today in so many different fallen events that swirl around us not least of which is the unending slaughter of the unborn by the practice around the world of abortion on demand. In other instances, many of the fresh babes in Christ are kept safe from major confrontations with the forces of evil. In all of them, however, He works to nurture a simple childlike trust as in the words to the children's song: *Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so.*

As Jesus, according to his human nature, grew in wisdom and stature - so also God matures and develops our new life in Christ. From growth in faith, we grow in wisdom and stature. And as we mature in the image of Christ, the Father may move us into closer and harsher encounters with the forces of evil. Maturity in Christ often brings with it a greater confrontation with the spiritual battle that God is waging against the forces of evil even in the face of our cries for deliverance.

But here in this post-Epiphany visitation, the situation is as Jesus would later tell his disciples: *My time has not yet come.* Now was not the time and therefore the baby Jesus was shielded from Satan's campaign of destruction. And with us, sometimes our time of trial and testing has not yet come . . . and sometimes it has. In either case, neither Jesus nor we are contending with mere flesh and blood, but rather, as Paul reminds, we are contending with the powers and principalities of Hell itself (Ephesians 6).

Reflecting on the events of the Christmas season, this is the rest of the story. Having made our own visitation to the Babe in Bethlehem with all the wonders of the season and its joy, let us not forget that the arrival of this baby portended the outbreak of all-out war against the forces of evil that God was determined to win. The slaughter of the innocent children in Bethlehem is just the Dragon's first salvo. There are more coming in the rest of the story. The birth of Jesus signals the most pivotal epiphany in human history that sets in motion the events that will lead to the climax of God's plan to rescue us from sin, death, and the Devil. We must look to the cross, where they are defeated strangely by the innocent becoming guilty and the guilty becoming innocent. And what good news! *WE* are the guilty ones who are declared innocent! In, with, and under all the tragic events that attend the Christmas Season – then and now – let us celebrate the arrival of the Lord's priceless treasure. It was gift-wrapped in swaddling clothes in Bethlehem, protected in Egypt, paid for in Jerusalem, and once again delivered to us this season. Blessings as you ponder this after-Epiphany. *It is the rest of the story.*

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