



St Peter's by the Lake Anglican Church



The Holy Innocents
December 28th, 2025

Sermon Preached by

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The Holy Innocents
Jeremiah 31.15-17
Psalm 124
1 Corinthians 1.26-29
Matthew 2.13-18



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Threads and Echos

Threads and echos, past and present, origin stories and reminders of what was and what is to come.

Today, we “celebrate” the feast of the Holy Innocents or Childermas, although it seems a bit callous to celebrate a massacre of children when commemoration is more appropriate. To begin with this day was a day of mourning, solemnity and completely separate from the Christmas story usually marked in July but eventually with the incorporation of aspects pagan festivals such as the Norse festival of light and saturnalia by the time the middle ages arrived it was incorporated into the 12 days of Christmas feasting that started on Christmas Day and culminating on the twelfth night being the fifth of January. (Imagine twelve days of eating, drinking, dancing, and non-stop fun, maybe next year?) This particular day became less about the loss of lives and more about celebrating. Some medieval customs included parents abdicating their authority for the day, boy bishops or girl abbesses being appointed, and, strangely, any decisions made by the children were generally upheld. Children might be whipped to remember the suffering, but it was followed by feasting and children running amok. It was also the first official rostered day off of the year, as no work was to be done on the day the feast fell. So, no work on a Sunday for the following year.

However, as Mark Twain said "Never let the truth get in the way of a good story", other than Matthew, there is no evidence that the massacre happened; first-century historian Josephus recounts many of Herod's misdeeds, including the murder of his three sons, but is silent, as is his biographer, Nicholas of Damascus. Modern-day Roman scholars and theologians are also quiet. So where does this leave us?

This is an origin story connecting the threads of the Exodus story of Moses to Jesus written to Mathews community in Syria made up of Jewish and Gentile converts navigating their place and identity in their world of turmoil giving the Jewish converts a thread from their upbringing and the Gentiles a new history to satisfy the need for origin, by rooting Jesus in the Torah, the prophets and the aftermath of the crucifixion. The transfiguration well illustrates this.

What about the magi/wise dudes definitely not three of them and not kings as Herod would have been expecting them, but as the story suggests important people, they would have had an entourage, coming from the East they would have travelled the silk road, recounting their travel story where they were going how they ascertained that a saviour was going to be born, making a bit of money on the way. It would have taken them some time to reach their destination and to arrange a meeting with Herod.

Herod, what can you say about him? He was a despot, paranoid, evil human prone to murderous rages, susceptible to manipulation, particularly from his sister, constantly afraid

except for his architectural and engineering genius. We no longer have the temple he built, and, when allowed to dig, archaeologists did find some evidence of his foundations, but we still have the ruins of Masada, his fortress and tomb. After fact-checking with his spiritual advisors, the Pharisees, about the accuracy of the magi's claims, he sends them on their way. I am surprised they never met with an accident, but they probably would have had a legionary escort. They arrived at a house, not a stable, where the holy family were living, so this puts Jesus anywhere between 2 weeks and 18 months old. Hence, the alleged massacre of boys 2 years and under, and the threat to

Exodus and the murder of the Israelite boys by another paranoid leader. After telling their story, giving the gifts, and being somewhat entertained by the family, who were described as astronomers, astrologers, fortune tellers, and entrail readers, they interpreted a dream in which Herod killed them. They highailed it out the back way home. At the same time, Joseph also had a dream about Herod and what was likely to happen, and it is not inconceivable that they hid amongst the entourage of these men and escaped to Egypt. Moses saved the Israelites as they came out of Egypt. Jesus and family went out of Egypt when it was safe. This is an origin story, another thread to provide a foundation for Jesus being sent from God to save the world, as predicted by the prophets, enabling the Mathews community to understand and place themselves in their world, from past to present to future.

Where do we fit into this story? Where is the thread we attach ourselves to? It is the same thread given to us by the echo of Mathew's community: in the face of turmoil and a sense of helplessness, we have an origin that provides us with a solid foundation to sew the thread into the future.

God intervened in history at a particular time for a peculiar people. In the midst of the mess that is our world, with the same story of children being deliberately targeted, we have an assurance that he will do so again. The four "p's" are our guiding thread: prayer, preparation, patience and perseverance. We may never know where our thread will echo in the future, but it will.