

What Child Is This?

Matthew 2:13-23

December 28, 2025 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Pastor Alison Thatcher

Well, we're just three days out from what one pastor calls the "nativity snow globe," and we're already thrown back into the real world of narcissistic, paranoid tyrants who are willing to kill babies in order to cling onto their own power. I'm going to share a story recounted by Pastor Melissa Earley about studying today's gospel passage with her church's Bible group:

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We sat around the conference table in our church library, our Bibles open to the Gospel of Matthew. We had compared Matthew's genealogy with Luke's; we had read the story of the magi. Now we were studying the story of Herod killing the baby boys in Bethlehem in an attempt to rid himself of a rival for the throne.

Janet read the story out loud. When she finished, Anita said, "That's awful. What an awful story. Why would that story be in the Bible?"

"Great question," I said, grabbing hold of the entry point. "Why is this story in the Bible? Does it remind you of any other stories in the Bible? Even from the Old Testament?"

After a long silence, Jim said, "When God tells Abraham to kill Isaac?"

"Those battle stories," said Erin, "where God tells the Israelites to slaughter everyone, even the cattle."

I nodded, encouraged that they remembered these stories from earlier in our time together, but eager to get to the point. "I see why you see a connection to those stories," I said, "but no, I was thinking of Moses." I was met by blank faces. "What did Pharaoh want to do to the baby boys?" I asked. Still nothing. "Pharaoh wanted to kill them because there were too many Hebrews," I said.

I went on to remind them about how the midwives refused to comply--a dangerous act of defiance. And how Moses's parents put him in a basket of reeds and pitch and then put him in the river, where he was scooped up by Pharaoh's daughter. "In Exodus," I said, "Moses was saved from the king of Egypt in order to lead the Hebrew people out Egypt. Here, Jesus is whisked off to Egypt--and then will return to Israel to save his people. He is the new Moses." I sat back and crossed my arms, satisfied.

"But the babies died," said Jen.

"Well yes, in the story the babies died. Don't read it like it's historical fact, like it actually happened. The author is trying to tell us something else," I said. "Something more important."

“More important than the baby boys dying?” asked Erin.

“But they didn’t really die,” I said.

“What happened to them, then?” asked Steve.

“No, I mean to say that what matters in reading most of the Bible isn’t whether or not something actually happened as historical fact but what it might be saying about God and human beings.”

“It doesn’t matter if the babies died?” asked Anita.

“That’s not what I meant. It matters if they died. But that’s not what the story is about. To get the real meaning of the story you have to get past the babies dying.”

The class looked at me. Silence stretched between us. The silence was full of the photo on the news of a three-year-old Syrian refugee in red shorts, washed up on shore. It was full of the children still dying in Aleppo—and of the children killed by guns in Chicago, the children who died in Sandy Hook, and the Arapahoe and Cheyenne children who died in the Sand Creek Massacre of 1864. The silence was full of the children dying in Haiti because they don’t have clean water and in Somalia because they don’t have enough food.

“No,” I said. “You don’t have to get past the babies dying.”

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This story was published in *The Christian Century* in December of 2016. Before the next administration’s policy of separating children from their parents at the U.S. southern border. Before the school shooting in Uvalde, Texas. Before the starved children in Palestine and the stolen children in Ukraine. The story of “the slaughter of the innocents” may have been fabricated to prove a prophetic point, but for a ruler who had his own wife and sons executed, the killing of a few dozen children in a backwater village would certainly be in character. And whether this particular slaughter happened or not, we know what humans are capable of, especially powerful humans whose power is threatened.

This gospel text doesn’t ask us to look away, to forget, to get past the babies dying. “A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.” Sometimes all we can do is wail and lament. Our world doesn’t do a great job of resisting violence. And our world doesn’t do a great job of allowing time to mourn that violence. “Yet,” writes Daniel Schultz, “real hope arises first among people who are able to talk about the awful things that have happened to them. By identifying Jesus with their suffering, Matthew gives his audience permission to weep and to mourn and to comfort one another. And they can begin to imagine the world in a new and different way.”

Still, in focusing on this text today we may ask not just, “Why is this story in the Bible?” but “Why do we have to read it in Christmas tide?” Rolf Jacobson notes, “It’s a reminder that religion is not the opiate of the masses. Christian faith is a very serious witness to the response of God to the horrors of the human condition. It’s not safe for anybody. But what’s

at stake is worth God becoming a human being to in turn then die, because the same engines of empire that moved to kill these innocent children is the same engine that moves to kill Jesus in the end.” It’s the same engine that exists today.

So, what does it mean to have real hope in a world where it feels like death and injustice might break us? Where children are victims of senseless violence? Where homelessness is criminalized and racial profiling goes unchecked? Jesus was born into poverty as a helpless child. Before he ever had a home, he was a refugee, fleeing state violence with his family into Egypt. Later on in Matthew Jesus tells us that whatever we do to “the least of these” we do to him. Could we look at any child living in poverty or any adolescent refugee and ask ourselves, “What child is this,” and answer, “This, this is Christ.” Could that be where our hope is? Not by getting over the children we have lost, either personally or societally, but by believing in a world where children can be saved by stubbornly doing onto others as we would do onto Jesus?

Jesus escapes state violence as a child, thanks to his brave parents. Pope Francis considered Joseph “the special patron of all those forced to leave their native lands because of war, persecution, and poverty.” Jesus later fell victim to persecution and state violence anyway. And then he rose again and said, “Nu-uh, violence and tyrannical power don’t get to thrive. The poor child thrives. The unwed mother thrives. The brown-skinned refugee thrives. The least of these.” Let us support each other in our lamentations. Let us mourn and wail together and not try to “get past the babies dying.” And let us hope together. Let us imagine a new way for this world, the way Jesus risked all to come and show us.