

There is some of the Christmas story we don't tell our children, because it is dark and dangerous. There is some of the Christmas story we don't even like to think about or talk about or preach about because it is dark and dangerous; it detracts from the very sense of joy and promise and peace that the Christmas story is supposed to tell. There's some of the Christmas story we don't think about very often, and it is the part that comes to us from the Gospel of Matthew.

It is the part that concerns King Herod, the governor of Jerusalem and the surrounding area. From Matthew, we tell our kids that Joseph had strong faith and a good heart and so stayed with Mary. From Matthew, we tell our kids about the Wise

Men, who traveled from far away to worship the baby Jesus. We place this event right at Christmas, though the Scripture implies they could have arrived as much as two years later. No matter.

What we don't tell them is the darker story, that King Herod wanted to destroy the child, because the child was a threat. Think about it. If the one born in Bethlehem is to be King, then where would that leave Herod? So, he orders all children under two years old destroyed, Jesus along with the rest.

It's a dark story, one that had happened before, with Moses. Back then, Pharaoh had ordered all little Hebrew boys destroyed, but then Moses' mother put him in a basket in the Nile River, where Pharaoh's daughter finds him, rescues him, and raises him. Moses' birth is set against this grim backdrop of

world leaders wanting to destroy, and so is the birth of Jesus.

We don't tell this story to our children, because they are not old enough. Old enough to understand that this is a dangerous world filled with folks out to destroy what is good and godly. Time enough for them to find that out. They don't need to know that the very security of Jesus was threatened by a powerful ruler and that it was only through a dream and an angel that Joseph took his young son and fled to Egypt until the danger passed.

No, we much prefer the Christmas story of Luke. If Matthew's story has at its edges fear and terror, Luke's always seems to be bathed in the soft glow of a beautiful starlit night, just waiting for angel song to break the silence of the night with tidings of joy and peace.

To be sure, in Luke there is also an earthly ruler, not just a local king, but the Great Emperor of Rome himself, Caesar Augustus. But if Herod's power in Matthew has the potential to destroy or disrupt the work of God, in Luke even the Emperor himself brings no danger. Sure, he demands census or a tax, but we're all used to that.

Augustus can make all the decrees he wants, but they are all irrelevant to the true ruler of us all, God himself. In fact, it is through this census decree that Joseph and Mary end up in Bethlehem, where it was prophesied the savior would be born. The irony is that Augustus is serving God's purposes, even though this is the furthest thing from his mind.

No danger, no drama in Luke. It must have been quite a journey

for young Joseph and Mary, to trek ninety miles or so from Nazareth to Bethlehem, especially with Mary great with child, but Luke doesn't dwell on the hardship or the danger. Mary and Joseph make their way, no muss, no fuss.

And while they are there, it's time for the baby to be born, and he is. No drama, no danger. All so calm, all so peaceful, all so bright. In fact, the only perhaps negative aspect about all this is that there was no room in the inn, so Jesus had to be placed in a manger. But we are told this only after Jesus is born. We have no sense that the young couple in terror and desperation went looking for a place. By the time Jesus is born, they already have a place, not a palace to be sure, but a place, we can assume that was safe and warm.

In fact, we wish for a little more drama, let's say about the innkeeper. The innkeeper who in fact is never mentioned anywhere in the Bible. We just sort of assume that because there was an inn there was an innkeeper. And tradition tries to decide about the innkeeper. Was he, or just as likely, she, a hard-hearted person who refused to make room for this couple?

Or was she at first hard-hearted, but then had her heart melt as she saw the desperation of the couple? Or, was she, as more recent tradition has wondered, a good hearted woman (or man) who did the best she could under trying circumstances? After all, we assume they hadn't made reservations.

The inn was full what with the census and everything, but she thought and thought, and finally realized the stable would be

safe and secure. And, in fact, we now have some sense that back then it would have been almost customary for a woman to use the stable instead of the inn. Folks, the stable was probably cleaner. And back then, inns were just one big room and there could be thieves and such around and in many towns, the inn was also the house of ill-repute.

So maybe the innkeeper did Joseph and Mary a favor. At the very least, offered some help.

Well, then, what to make of all this? I know it might seem strange for me to have juxtaposed Herod and the Innkeeper, in this sermon. After all, one is well-known and evil and powerful, the other not mentioned at all.

But what I find they have in common is this: they both had to decide. . . What to do about Jesus?

Whether the Christmas story is told against a backdrop of darkness and danger, as in Matthew or against a backdrop of wonder and peace, as in Luke, Christmas, the birth of Jesus, forces a decision: what to do about Jesus.

Herod's not the only one who wants to destroy Jesus, even Luke will come to tell us about arrest and trial and crucifixion. But Herod is the first. Confronted with Jesus, he wants him gone. Because Jesus is the ultimate threat.

Jesus is confirmation that God, not Herod, is in charge. Jesus comes to proclaim a kingdom based on justice and mercy, not

power and privilege. Herod can't take a chance.

As Christian people, we must be on watch against those who today would destroy Jesus. The war against terror is in some part a war in protecting our values that come to us through our faith in Christ. And as Christians we must be at the forefront in social and legal and political debates about morality and law and right and wrong. We must stand strong and defend against those whose vision is of a so-called value-neutral morality.

Christians might disagree about what exactly Christ would have us to believe or say, but we must be bold to follow our conscience, in issues ranging from abortion to drugs to euthanasia to the death penalty to feeding the hungry. Many in the national conversation seek to destroy Christ by claiming him

to be irrelevant. Christmas calls us again to stand against modern-day Herods who find Christ's message simply too dangerous and therefore must be banished from political debate.

And so too the innkeeper had to decide what to do about Jesus. Do we push him away from our door? Do we put him out back in the barn, glad he's there, safe and sound, but also glad he's not right here with us to disrupt the normalcy of our happy lives? Do we put him out back, out of sight out of mind, so we can go about living our lives the way we want to live our lives?

Or do we say, well if Jesus is out there in the stable, then that's where I'm going to be. . . because I need to be where Jesus is.

Christmas. Matthew's story is darker, but ultimately one of hope: despite the best efforts of evil to destroy, the child escapes. And Luke's story is lighter and invites us to bask in the wonder of it all and the joy and promise bound up in a little baby born to us.

But each in their own way, Herod and the Innkeeper confront us with an ultimate question about Christmas. Now that Jesus is here, now that the savior is born. . . In our outlook, our thoughts, our attitudes, our decisions, as we travel into the new year that awaits, what are WE going to do about him?