

## **The Battle of Christmas**

*“The Manger Invasion!”*

preached on Sunday, December 18<sup>th</sup>, 2005

Hope Community Church

707 – 10<sup>th</sup> Ave South

Minneapolis, MN 55415

(612) 378-8820

9:00am and 11:00am

Pastor Steve Treichler

*For His Glory and Our Joy!*

TEASER about “The Glory of Christmas” white elephant gift

**Introduction** – “Peace on earth? Really?”

Last week, picked Isaiah 9:1-9 as the call to worship – something struck me:

### **Isaiah 9:1-7**

<sup>1</sup>Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the Gentiles, by the way of the sea, along the Jordan— <sup>2</sup>The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned. <sup>3</sup>You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as men rejoice when dividing the plunder. <sup>4</sup>For as in the day of Midian’s defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor. <sup>5</sup>Every warrior’s boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire. <sup>6</sup>For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. <sup>7</sup>Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and for ever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.

VERSES 4 and 5 really caught my attention:

<sup>4</sup>For as in the day of Midian’s defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor. <sup>5</sup>Every warrior’s boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire.

Describe Midian’s defeat – Judges 6:33-7:25

This has gotten me thinking this week – that yes, Christmas is about Peace on Earth and Goodwill to ALL PEOPLE! BUT, this peace is only established by a battle – a huge battle that originated in the heavens between God and his enemies, namely Satan and his forces of evil.

How was this played out on earth?

### **Matthew 2:1-23**

1After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem 2and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."

3When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. 4When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. 5"In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

6"“But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,

are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for out of you will come a ruler  
who will be the shepherd of my people Israel."

Before we go any further, I need to introduce you to a few of the elements that you may be unfamiliar with in our narrative. We'll do this in the same way people get credits in a movie. . . in order of appearance.

First off, Bethlehem.

- Ancient city that had a few notable people who came from there, most importantly was David who would be king over Israel. David was born and raised in Bethlehem, shepherded sheep there, and was anointed king over Israel in the town of Bethlehem, thus it's name as "the city of David"
- However, it was a very "little town" as the song suggests. It probably was only about 300-1000 people, thus making it a very unimportant town politically and economically

Next, let's meet King Herod.

- Reigned over Judah from 37 BC-4 BC
- He was given the title "King of the Jews" by the Roman Senate in 40 BC; therefore he was very threatened when the real King showed up.
- Had many wives, but the one he admired highly was Mariamne, with which he had two sons.
- Because his wife and sons were a political threat to him, even though he once loved them dearly, he had them executed.
- Herod was not a nice guy . . . he was a power hungry and would do anything to keep his rightful place on the throne.

Third, let's meet the Magi.

- Magi were pagan astrologers that looked to the heavens to look for signs about the future. And although God strictly forbid astrology for his followers, he allows these pagan astrologers to come worship the newborn King, thus showing that anyone and everyone was welcome to worship Him. One of my favorite Christmas sayings is "Wise men still seek Him" Anyone and Everyone no matter what your background is invited to the party of the King!

Okay, let's keep going on in the rest of the story.

7Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared.

8He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

9After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. 11On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. 12And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

**The Magi pull a fast one on Herod.**

13When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the

child to kill him."

14So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, 15where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son."

### **Here we see the faithfulness and obedience of Joseph.**

16When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. 17Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: 18A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more."

This is probably one of the most tragic stories on all of Scripture. Innocent babies died because some stupid king wants to keep his reign. I hate Herod and I've never even met him, but I know I wouldn't like him.

19After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt 20and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child's life are dead."

21So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. 22But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, 23and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets: "He will be called a Nazarene."

### **Application**

This is a hard passage to really decipher. By way of application, we need to ask ourselves the most important question that we can whenever we read any passage of scripture: "What was the author's intent, that is Matthew's, to communicate when he wrote this passage?" Why did he chose to include this section of the Christmas story? I can think of two things that ring true to me.

First off, he wanted to communicate God's faithfulness to fulfill all that He promises. Four specific promises, including one that is intensely tragic, are completely fulfilled in a very short space of time in the young Jesus life. I think Matthew really wants his reader's to know and believe that He has come -- the promises have been come true! The Messiah is Jesus Christ.

Second, I think Matthew includes the story of Herod killing the children of Bethlehem to declare something to the readers of His gospel account . . . and it's not something we normally associate with Christmas, but it is extremely relevant. Matthew wanted to let us know that from very early in Jesus life He was in a battle for His life. The forces of evil, both spiritual evil in the form of the devil and in the form of human evil in corrupt and abusive political power, were against him.

That is the message of Christmas. Christmas is not only having family time about sleigh rides or chestnuts roasting on a open fire or choirs singing or trees nicely decorated or Christmas carols or exchanging presents or even about. No, this passage reminds us of the reality that Christmas is about Almighty God declaring war on the work of the devil and his agents, and we are involved in this war. If there is anything I know about war, and I know very little only having 1 relative who fought in any war, is that war is brutal. We are in a war, like it or not.

Now we can ask some perhaps harder questions about this text that the text itself doesn't answer, but other passages of scripture make clear.

Q1. Why did God stage this the way He did? Not in a grand fashion like having the angels appear to the entire Roman Senate in full session. Wouldn't that be great? Why does the birth of His Son not bring that kind of greeting card?

A1. Romans 1:20 answers this question.

20 For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities--his eternal power and divine nature-- have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. God enjoys being somewhat hidden, although He is also fully in sight. If you want to disbelieve in Him, it is possible, you would not be considered an intellectual idiot (although in reality, you may be coming close). God discloses Himself in subtle ways since He likes His followers to trust Him, not just acknowledge the obvious. He will remain hidden if you wanted Him to stay that way.

Q2. Why did it have to include the death of children?

A2. This is a hard question, and if you are going through personal tragedy, it is one that you personally feel. There are three things I know about why bad things happen. First, God is in complete control of all things. Second, we live in a fallen world, where things are not as they should be. We are in the midst of a cross-fire of spiritual and moral war. And third, God mourns over the losses we face. These may sound contradictory to you, but it is the Biblical answer to this incredible problem.

To illustrate this I would like to close this morning by sharing with you one of my favorite readings by Max Lucado. In this reading he offers hope for the tragedy of Christmas by looking at the victory of Easter.

**The Story's Not Over Yet**  
by Max Lucado

From *Christ in Easter: a Family Celebration* (Colorado Springs: Nav Press 1990), pp.7-12.

The message of Easter is clear -- the story's not over yet. We haven't heard the punchline, and we haven't finished the battle. Don't be premature in your judgments or too final in your opinion. The Judge hasn't returned, and the jury isn't in.

The story isn't over yet. All that needs to be said hasn't been said. And all that will be seen hasn't been seen.

That's good news. If your eyes have ever moistened at the newsreels of the hungry, remember the story's not over yet. If you've ever been bewildered as you beheld pain triumph over peace -- keep the Easter message in mind. The story's not over yet.

If you've ever found your fists clinched in rage as you read of the atrocities at Auschwitz, I've got something to show you. If you've stood distraught as you hear stories of yet another hijacking...another serial murderer...another child beating, there is a verse I want you to consider.

Or perhaps your feelings are more personal. Maybe the ugly moments in history and open wounds of our day dared to leave your television screen and enter your house.

Maybe you've buried a child whose body was broken by a reckless driver. Maybe your child has never called you daddy. Maybe the one who promised to love you forever loved you for only as long as it was

convenient. Maybe you've suffered personally from the cruelties in the world. Maybe the shadow of the question mark has blackened your door.

Maybe you have asked "Why?"

"The rain on the unjust I can understand...but why the just?" "To suffer the consequences of my sins makes sense, but why should I pay for the sins of others?" "Why the innocent?" "Why the children?" "Why the pure?" "Why me?"

Hard questions. Necessary questions. Questions surfaced by a perplexing passage in Matthew. Is there any passage in Scripture bloodier than the killing of the children by the soldiers of Herod? Though not specifically described, its bloody footprints are left between the lines of these verses.

When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:

"A voice is heard in Ramah,  
weeping and great mourning,  
Rachel weeping for her children  
and refusing to be comforted,  
because they are no more." (Matthew 2:16-18)

It's a grisly scene: horses galloping, mothers with small boys running and screaming. The flashing of weapons. The flow of innocent blood. The sudden stillness of tiny hands. Mothers clutching lifeless bodies to blood-soaked breasts.

It's a scene of swords piercing the innocent.

No justification. No explanation. Just cruel carnage. A senseless slaughter.

And during it all, a fat king sits on a throne less than ten miles away, blind to the tears he has summoned, deaf to the anguish he has caused. Herod drinks wine the color of the blood he is spilling.

The wail heard in Bethlehem echoes through the stars. A chorus of chaos refusing to be comforted. A thousand tears with one voice, a hundred hearts with one question.

"Why?"

The composer of this chaos watches from a nearby mountain. With each flash of the sword, he claps. With each plunge of the dagger, he gloats.

Evil at its worst. Blackness at its darkest.

This madman sheds no tears for the young-dead. He is intent on only one thing: killing the Christ before He leaves the cradle.

And when the ravage is completed and the madman knows he has failed, he curses, swirls around, and returns to his pit.

Thirty years later, the other moment for which Satan has waited arrives. He is repeating his drama of desolation. Once again he is slaughtering the innocent.

Once again swords flash and feet scamper. Once again a spineless king called Herod is a pawn in the play. Once again there are the tears of a mother who wonders why. Once again flesh is torn. Once again there are the cries of anguish.

Once again Satan is trying to kill life itself.

This time he has Him where he wants Him. God on a cross. The One who escaped him in Bethlehem is bolted to a tree. Satan applauds as the skin is ripped. "This time You won't get away!"

A spear breaks through Jesus' ribs. Once again the innocent is pierced.

"I have done it!" The madman dances amidst the demons. "I have won!"

But his claim is premature.

For the crucified One who descends the spiral stairway into the cavern of death is not a defeated messiah. And He has not come to surrender. Far from it. He is a creator, and He has come to reclaim His own.

He has come to storm the gates of death.

He scatters the demons and rips open the prison doors. He takes captivity captive and frees the faithful.

You can be sure of one thing. Among the voices that sing His welcome are His Bethlehem brothers.

They died that He might escape. He has now died that they might escape. They died that He might live.

And now, He's returned to return the favor.

The Easter announcement is clear. Victory is secure. Wails of Bethlehem will turn into the victories of Calvary. Don't forget that.

The next time the soldiers of Satan steal the joy from your arms. The next time your prayers float into a silent sky. The next time you wonder how God could sit still while the innocent suffer. Remember, the story's not over yet. Remember the Easter Jesus rescued the imprisoned and

remember...He's coming to do it again..

Remember, the story is not over yet. Now, how are we going to have this type of hope that can look to Christ and trust God even when, or especially when times are tough? That is the topic we are going to talk about next week -- Riveting your mind with hope!