

When 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."

¹⁴*So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, ¹⁵ where 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."*

¹⁶*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. ¹⁷ Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:*

¹⁸*"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 2:13-18)*

There Really Are Monsters!

The monster in the closet is a standard Hollywood cliché. Just about every horror film uses it. Pixar made a joke out of it with the movie *Monsters, Inc.* Even comic strips pick up the theme. Of course, these kinds of things become clichés because they resonate with people, especially people who have children with overactive imaginations. As a child, I didn't like the shadows in the closet. How many of us have to leave a light on for our kids at night? Sadly, monsters are real – not the kind that hide in closets. A far worse kind of monster stalks news reports and police blotters. This world is full of human monsters, of people who hurt and destroy. This morning, we have an example of that kind of monster in one of the most terrible stories in the Scriptures. When we consider him, we can't help but realize **there really are monsters!**

I.

A monster tried to kill Jesus. His name was Herod the Great. Herod was an old man when these events happened. He was paranoid and more than half insane. In the course of his reign, he murdered his wife, her mother, her grandfather, three of his own sons, his brother-in-law and more subjects that history can record. Caesar Augustus, the Roman Emperor, was his close friend. And Herod wrote him so many times asking for permission to execute this or that son that Augustus finally said, "I'd rather be Herod's pig than his son." When he was dying, Herod ordered that prominent people from every part of Israel should be arrested and imprisoned in Jerusalem. Then he ordered that when he died, they should all be executed so that people would mourn when he died. That last order was never carried out – but it shows that the lives of others meant nothing to him.

There's no such thing as werewolves or the bogeyman or creatures in our children's closets. But there most definitely are monsters in this world. They're people who care only about themselves and they don't care how many other people get hurt, as long as they get what they want. The worst of these monsters are every parent's nightmare – those child molesters that get so much press. But every tyrant in the world qualifies. Every man or woman who abuses or neglects their children, every husband who slaps his wife around, every bully who takes pleasure in the suffering of others qualifies.

Herod was a monster. God warned Joseph that Herod would try to kill the child of Mary. Why? Why would even a monster want to hurt a baby? Because of Herod's paranoia and the message that the Magi had brought. Remember those guys? They showed up on Herod's doorstep asking, "Where is he that is born king of the Jews?" Herod held that title. But he was only half Jewish and he had very little support among his people. The Romans kept him on his throne. He was terrified of his own sons trying to take his throne. How much harder would it be for him to hang onto power if some other person – some person more Jewish – were to make a credible claim to be the true king of Israel?

But Herod's ego wasn't the only power at work here. The devil also had a hand in these events. He didn't care about Herod, even though he certainly enjoyed the suffering that Herod caused. The devil understood what had happened in Bethlehem. He knew that God was moving to fulfill his plan of salvation. He

knew that Jesus had come to destroy his power and to win eternal life for all people everywhere. Of course, the devil didn't want that to happen.

But God did not allow them to kill his Son. In the middle of the night, the Lord roused Joseph from his bed and sent him to Egypt for safety. Stop and think about that for a moment. There were no street lamps at that time. There were no interstate highways or cars. There were no McDonald's or 7/11's open all night where they could buy food and diapers. To set out in the middle of the night, with no planning or preparation was going to be extremely difficult. Even though the Romans patrolled the highways, robbery on the road was always a problem in the ancient world. This was going to be a dangerous trip. And the only reason that a man like Joseph would put his family in that kind of danger was that it would be worse to stay home.

God sent Joseph and Mary and their son to Egypt to preserve his plan of salvation. We can assume that the gold, frankincense and myrrh that the wise men had brought came in very handy. No doubt, they used those gifts to support themselves. God kept Jesus alive so that he could complete his mission of dying and rising to save us. That's the heart of this story. The devil and his allies did not win. God was always one step ahead of them. No matter how hard the devil tries, no matter how intense the world's hatred is, God always wins in the end. It isn't even close. God is God and he can't lose.

That matters because not all monsters are as obvious as Herod. They're not all child molesters and wife beaters and bullies. In fact, many monsters never even break the law. We all have a monster inside us, even we Christians who show up here, Sunday after Sunday. How can I say that? Because we're all born like Herod was, as sinners. Herod's problem was pride. He loved himself first and foremost. In reality, he loved himself alone. That's true for every child molester and wife beater. And it's true of the sinner that lives in our hearts, too. We love ourselves. We put ourselves first. We love our children, but over and over again, we treat them as burdens. We allow our frustration with their sinful natures to lead us to explode into sins of our own. The sinner inside us is a monster. He hates God. He doesn't want to live this life of love for God and for each other. He hates it when God tells us to put the Lord first, and to put other people ahead of ourselves. That self-absorbed, selfish sinner is a monster. And over and over again in our lives – even in the lives of us church going Christians – that sinner succeeds in making us act like the selfish monsters he is. The sin in our hearts comes out in our words and our actions and in our attitudes. That sinner makes us guilty. We deserve to die and go to hell forever.

But God sent Jesus into this world to kill that sinner in our hearts and to replace him with a new creation. Jesus lived a life of pure love. Even as a baby, Jesus was never selfish or self-absorbed. He was dedicated to serving God, so he was dedicated to serving the people around him. Jesus was perfect because we can't be, not as long as we have that monster inside us. God the Father counts that perfect life of Jesus as ours. He sees us as if we had no monster inside us. Jesus died and paid for all that the monster is guilty of. He paid for all that pride and sin and selfishness in our hearts. He paid for all the ways it came out in our lives. He took it all to the cross. He suffered all our hell there. He died and then he rose and God wiped away all record of that monster. In his book, we're saints, not sinners.

Jesus comes to each one of us to slay our monster. He comes in the law and he accuses us. He forces us to admit that monster's really there. We don't like to do that. It hurts to admit that we're sinners and we deserve hell. But Jesus forces us to see the truth. Then he comforts us with the absolute promise that we are forgiven. He comes to us in the word of eternal life, he comes to us in baptism, he comes to us in communion and he tells us our sin is gone. He planted a new believer inside us and he gives us the strength to kill that sinner every day. One day, Jesus will call us home – either we'll die or he will return. Then the monster will be gone forever. We will be truly perfect. We will be free. The promise of that day gives us the strength today and every day to fight against our monster. It gives us the longing to live as children of God.

II.

Herod first tried to zero in on Jesus and kill him. That would've been the most certain way to get rid of his problem. So he tried to deceive the Magi into telling him where the baby was. When that didn't work, Herod tried the shotgun approach. That crime shows that **there really are monsters. A monster slaughtered innocent children.**

Herod was willing to kill as many children as it took to get rid of this imaginary threat to his power. This crime is so horrible that many people today deny that it happened. Their reason is simple: there's no record of it outside of the Bible. They argue that someone would've written down a report of this kind of

atrocious. But before you get too worked up about that, you need to understand a few things. First of all, this was two thousand years ago, in a time when there were no newspapers and books had to be hand copied. Most of the records that were made then have long since turned to dust. Further, compared to some of the other things that Herod did, this just wasn't news. You see, we Christians have tended to exaggerate the scale of this crime. How many babies do you think died? Hundreds? Thousands? Probably not. The best estimate is that Bethlehem had about 2000 inhabitants at this time. That means that at most around 20 children would've been murdered. That certainly seems like a lot. And it was. But think about crimes in our time. Just this week, a gunman in a Santa suit killed nine people in Los Angeles. How many people will remember the specifics of that event in six months? Given Herod's bloodthirsty reign, this was small stuff.

But it was still terrible. Why did God let this happen? Clearly, he knew that it would. Matthew says that it fulfills the prophecy in Jeremiah about Rachel weeping for her children. God has the power to stop things like this. But he doesn't always do that. Why not?

The answer is one of the hardest things about living our faith in a sinful world. God does rule all things. Even atrocities only happen because he permits them to happen. And the truth is, God prevents many more tragedies from happening. Because they don't happen, we don't know about them and we aren't impressed. But tragedies and atrocities will continue for as long as this world continues because the world as we know it is corrupted by sin. God never promised that he would put an end to suffering while this sinful world lasts. He never said that we could escape from monsters on this side of heaven. Even though it's horrible to think of God allowing tyrants to murder babies, things like that will continue to happen until the Lord comes back.

That really is the point of the prophecy from Jeremiah. If you read it in its Old Testament context, it's not talking specifically about the coming of Christ at all. It's talking about all the sufferings of God's people under the oppression of foreign, unbelieving rulers. Rachel was the ancestor of Israel. Poetically, she weeps for all those children that were slaughtered when all those different armies swept through Israel. She weeps for all that believers suffer at the hands of unbelievers. The children killed by Herod were only one example of the power of sin and unbelief in this world.

But Jesus did come to put an end to that power. He died and he rose to free this world from the dominion of suffering and sin and the devil. But he will not completely do that until he returns. When Jesus comes back, he's going to undo all that sin has done to us. All those who died in faith will live again in a new and perfect world. Never again will we suffer. Never again will we die. Never again will any evil touch us. While we wait for that time, Jesus comforts us with his love. He strengthens us by reminding us of his promises. He teaches us to live by faith and not by sight. What we see is a world in which suffering never ends. Evil people inflict pain on defenseless children. But by faith we know that even in all that, God is doing all things for the good of his church. God will make even the greatest evil to benefit his people. And one day soon, our Lord will return and put an end to all evil. And we will live with him in joy forever.

God promises a day when there will be no more monsters. No Herods. No child molesters. No wife beaters. No bullies. No sinful natures in our hearts. And no devil. All the enemies of Christ, including the devil himself, will be locked down in hell forever. Never again will they have the power to hurt us. All the believers will be freed from the monster in our hearts. And we will never hurt each other again. Our love for Christ will be perfect. So our love for each other will be perfect, too. And we will live that way forever. Look forward to that day! Amen.