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“Herod is going to search for the child to destroy him” (Matthew 2:14).

1 John 1:5—2:2; Matt 2:13-18

Lest the meaning of Christmas be swept too quickly into the sweet sentiments of the holiday, the liturgical calendar surrounds it with stories of martyrdom. Stephen is stoned (Dec 26), Thomas Becket murdered (Dec 29), and even the beautiful Feast of the Holy Family does not spare us Simeon’s prediction of coming suffering. Today’s commemoration of the massacre of the Holy Innocents reminds us that the Incarnation does not guarantee a safe descent by Jesus into the human condition or safety for his followers.

Matthew wants his readers to know from the outset that Jesus is vulnerable and subject to the deprivation and uncertainty all human beings face. Herod is not the only one to want him silenced or dead. The temple establishment, Sanhedrin, Herod Antipas and the Roman occupation will all see Jesus as a threat to their authority, and in the end they conspire to capture and crucify him.

The story of the Holy Innocents only appears in Matthew and serves as a prophecy fulfillment story that links Joseph of Nazareth to Joseph of Egypt. King Herod’s murders repeat Pharaoh’s genocide of the Hebrew children, but neither atrocity can thwart God’s rescue of his people, first from famine by Joseph and later by Moses and the Exodus, both foreshadowing the redemptive mission of Jesus.

What makes today’s Gospel so shocking is the deliberateness with which Herod sets out to protect his throne after consulting with his own court scholars and then the visiting Magi about the identity of the child. Herod knows he is trying to kill the

Christ, the promised Messiah. There is real evil here, an open flouting of God's promise to send a savior.

By placing this story at the beginning of his Gospel, Matthew is preparing us to understand that Jesus will be opposed by more than just human forces. He will confront genuine evil entrenched in the world and deeply nested in human hearts. His temptations in the desert reveal the real enemy using these others to defeat him. It will cost Jesus his life to expose this Evil as he carries the effects of sin into a death embrace on the cross to break its hold on the human heart.

Christmas proclaims that God is among us to save us from sin, and the story of Herod and the martyrs of Bethlehem reminds us just what sin looks like and can do.

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