



**Sermons from St. Marks
United Church of Christ
New Albany, Indiana**



**Jealousy and Weeping
Matthew 2: 13-18
Rev. Dr. John E. Manzo
December 30, 2007**

We gather together just days after Christmas.

For the most part, the gifts have all been opened--unless some family is coming today.

There are leftovers sitting in our refrigerators.

There might be still a some uneaten cookies to be had.

Days after Christmas; when we heard that wonderful and beautiful story of the birth of Jesus Christ.

That's the good news; but, as usually happens, the good news comes with bad news.

We read in Matthew about King Herod's reaction to the birth of the Son of God, the Prince of Peace, the Savior of the world. The reaction is one of his jealousy and weeping of others.

Herod orders that all the male children be killed who were 2 years old and younger. Of course, Jesus is not among the group murdered because Joseph, who had been warned in a dream, had taken his family to safety in Egypt.

It's a story which, to be quite honest, tends to take the joy out of Christmas. It's a story of horror in the midst of great joy.

I think to really understand this story we need to look at two of the characters involved and get some perspective.

First there is Herod. Over the years scholars have debated this event, this massacre, because there is no outside verification of the event. The only place in the world this massacre is recorded is in the Gospel of Matthew.

However, I believe the story does have great credibility for a couple of reasons.

First, this massacre was not as huge and as monumental, historically, than most of us would

fathom. Bethlehem was a very small town, pretty obscure, and a massacre like this would have claimed the lives of 20 - 30 children. This would have been heart-breaking and devastating to the people of Bethlehem, but would have gone on virtually unnoticed by the rest of the world.

Secondly, this story is a story very consistent with Herod.

What was Herod like?

Adolf Hitler. Josef Stalin. Saddam Hussein. Like them.

In fact, Herod was a barbarian the world has probably never seen the likes of. He had his wife killed. He had his mother-in-law killed. He had three of his sons killed. Caesar Augustus remarked that it was safer to be one of Herod's pigs than it was to be his son.

Upon his death he gave orders that the artists and teachers be killed so that there would be mourning in his kingdom at the time of his death.

Herod was a rotten guy.

In this story, Herod reminds us of the presence of evil.

Another character is Joseph.

Joseph is not a person we pay a lot of attention to. Part of the reason for this is that Joseph is only mentioned 16 times in the Gospels; the bulk of those references in Matthew and Luke. Joseph is mentioned only twice in the Gospel of John, and not mentioned at all in Mark.

Yet, Joseph is a pivotal person in the Gospels because whereas Herod was symbolic of evil, Joseph reminds us of goodness and is the representative of obedience to us.

If you had to pick one attribute of Joseph which stands above the others, it is the attribute of obedience. No matter what happened, Joseph was obedient to God.

When Mary was pregnant with Jesus, initially, Joseph felt shame and abandonment--he believed that Mary had been unfaithful to him.

Yet, in a dream, an angel told him what had happened and that he, Joseph, must continue with his plans to marry Mary.

And Joseph obeyed.

When Jesus was born some neat stuff happened. Angels, wise men from the east, shepherds showed up. Big time stuff.

Yet, when an angel told Joseph that it was unsafe to remain where they were, Joseph obeyed.

Whereas Herod reminds us of the foulness of evil; Joseph reminds us that obedient people are specially blessed by God and there is goodness in this world.

We see a contrast of good and evil. Herod is consumed with jealousy and that jealousy grows into a savage rage. Innocents are slaughtered because of the childish rants of a jealous man.

Joseph, on the other hand, quietly does what is right and good. What has taken place to him and to Mary is beyond his comprehension and beyond his imagination as to what life generally offers. But he quietly goes about doing what is right.

There is a part of me that believes that we can all have the jealousy and evil of Herod in our hearts and we can all have the quiet goodness of Joseph. It often depends on which way we move in life and the choices we make.

Several years ago Rabbi Marc Gellman, one of the two members of ABC's *The God Squad*, gave a commencement address. In it he spoke of an old native American story of a chief telling his grandchildren that there was a war going on inside him between two wolves, one the wolf of kindness and the other the wolf of cruelty. His grandchildren asked him which wolf would win the fight, and he said to them, "The wolf that will win is the wolf you feed."

Christmas is a season of great joy. The Savior is born! We delight in the birth of Jesus and grandly celebrate the season.

Christmas is also a season of great warning. The Christmas story, with Herod, is a reminder to us that the presence of God in our midst is not a welcomed presence for everyone. There is evil that dances in this world as much as there is good in this world.

How we live our lives, how we respond to Christ in our midst is a choice that each of us has to make. We live, ourselves, with the decision as to what we feed. Do we feed the wolf of goodness and kindness? Or, do we feed the wolf of jealousy and cruelty?

The Christmas story, and this story push us in the right direction.

This is a story, interestingly enough, not without irony.

Herod has the children killed because he is jealous, he does not want to compete with another King of the Jews.

And, of course, he misses the very one he was searching for. In his blind rage, in his moment of supreme savagery, he misses his target completely and totally. Jealousy and evil cause a great deal of weeping and cruelty, but Herod ultimately fails.

And quiet, obedience Joseph leads his family to safety and protects the Savior of the world.

Both Herod and Joseph chose to feed wolves. Herod chose poorly whereas Joseph chose to feed the right wolf and allow God to change the world.