

**December 29, 2019**  
**First Sunday of Christmas**

**First Presbyterian Church**  
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## **Who is Missing?**

Matthew 2:13-23

Where could he be? We sat in the middle of my living room staring into an empty green canvas storage box. Where could he be? My four-year-old grandson, Austin, and I were placing the figures of my nativity set on my coffee table, one by one. I was telling Austin the Christmas story—the angels and their proclamation, the shepherds and their hurry, the wisemen and their gifts, Mary and Joseph and their faithfulness...sheep, donkeys, cows, camels. We had placed eighteen of the twenty wooden shapes on the table. Now it was time to gently put baby Jesus in his manger in front of his adoring parents. To be honest, I was feeling quite smug about the hands-on way in which I had told Austin the Christmas story. I had held his attention, and now it was time for the pinnacle of the story.... I reached into the green canvas box for Jesus and his manger, but...the box was empty—no baby and no manger. While silently chastising myself for not checking ahead of time to be certain that all the pieces were in the box, my mind raced to create, for a four year old, a theological sound reason, as to why baby Jesus had vanished. As I stumbled over my lame explanation, Austin grabbed the green box, turned it upside down, and shook it hard...out fell the baby Jesus and his small wooden barn bed. Both had been stuck under the cardboard bottom of the box. Problem solved...and...once again, I am reminded that Jesus is often in unlikely places. Austin placed the baby in the small manger in the holy scene—the story was complete.

But was it really complete? Who was missing? I have a beloved collection of nativity sets. The one that Austin and I had placed on my coffee table was purchased just for Austin. I wanted a set that he could play with, without me hovering over him. I have lots of other sets and they each have their own uniqueness—different cultures, sizes, and folks. For instance, one incorporates John the Baptist into the scene. Another includes an old testament prophet, while yet another includes the little drummer boy. Go figure...the little drummer boy is not part of the biblical Christmas story—but then, surprising to many, neither is a donkey. Most of my sets do, however, include a donkey; however, there is one person who is never included...yet the man has a significant role in Matthew's birth story—King Herod! Matthew tells the story of the birth of Jesus in 31 verses. King Herod is a supporting actor in 23 of those 31 verses. Yet he doesn't make it to nativity sets, Christmas pageants, Christmas cards and only a few paintings. WHY?

Well, of course, the answer is obvious—who wants to disrupt the tranquility of the Christmas story by inserting a barbaric dictator in the midst of it! In fact, when I read that Matthew 2:13-23 was the lectionary text for this Sunday, I was a little resistant myself. I knew I wouldn't be

ready to leave Mary and Joseph peacefully holding their newborn...and I imagined that you would not be either. I didn't want to read about the harsh reality of the world where heartless tyrants go to extremes to preserve their own authority. I surely didn't want to preach about it—and particularly not in my pajamas. Yet, in the collective wisdom of the lectionary scholars, it is the Gospel reading for today. These scholars, and Matthew, push us into reality, even though we would all like to gaze just a bit longer at the precious holy child “asleep on the hay.” However, when we stop the story at the manger, we rob ourselves of some of the power that the story has to offer to us. For Jesus is often in unlikely places.

Matthew tells us that King Herod of Judea was tipped off by the traveling directionally-challenged wisemen. “Where is this child who has been born King of the Jews?” they ask King Herod. Really! To be so-called wisemen that just doesn't seem like such a wise question! Why would one ask King Herod, the Roman-appointed political King of Judea, a Jewish providence, for directions to the King of the Jews? King Herod thought he was the King of the Jews! My guess is that King Herod himself was a bit stunned by the question. In fact, actually, he was raging mad—mad enough to concoct a horrendous plan: “Wisemen, when you find this baby, please come back and tell me. I would love to pay my respects to this family.”

Well, we know the story: the wisemen follow a star, find Jesus, gift him well, and are warned in a dream to bypass the palace on their way home. King Herod, you have been out-foxed! Exploding, he issues a decree to violently rid Bethlehem of potential future kings. Mary and Joseph are warned by an angel to leave Bethlehem. They secretly flee to Egypt as refugees—“the no room in the inn” becomes “no room in the country.” This small family arrives in Egypt where they live until King Herod dies. Then, yet again, an angel appears to Joseph in a dream announcing that it was safe to return home.

If Herod was, in fact, a figure in our nativity sets, we might imagine him wearing a black robe with a matching cape around his shoulders sporting a nasty frown on his face—the villain of the set. But strangely enough, Herod was a leader who did get some good things done. In fact, he was called Herod the Great because he executed an excellent redevelopment plan in Judea that included impressive aqueducts, new theaters, and the restoration of Solomon's Temple. However, he also executed his wife, two sons, judges, former mentors, potential future leaders, and others. Evil is rarely dressed as a villain.

Biblical scholars debate whether this event actually happened or was a story created by Matthew. Matthew was a Jewish sage who used his gospel to prove that Jesus was the fulfillment of God's promised Messiah. Matthew's birth story is no exception to this. He creatively weaves the Jewish story into the birth story, quoting the prophet Hosea “out of Egypt I have called my son”—referring to Rachel crying for her exiled children—invoking memories of the exodus from Egypt. Thus, the academic debate bubbles up. Some claim the story is fiction. They point to the fact that the massacre was not recorded by historians as their evidence. Others counterpoint, debating that such a story would not have been recorded in historical records because it mainly affected peasants.

For me, it doesn't really matter if it happened or not—the historical event, true or not, is a water-in-your face wake up reminder that Jesus was born into the real world—a world ruled by a brutal and violent king. Jesus was born into a tyrannical political system that oppressed its citizens and treated them unjustly. God sent Jesus into the darkness of this world. The Gospel of John tells us, “The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.” Jesus was not born in a metaphoric snow globe protected from the evil of the world.

Jesus was, instead, born in the middle of the world with all its chaos. Oppressive taxes, crowded streets, ruthless leadership, horrific violence, fleeing families are just as much a part of the story as singing angels and happy shepherds.

I confess, I don't really want King Herods in my nativity sets. Perhaps, however, if he stood on the sideline, it would remind me that Jesus was born into a messy world—not to clean it up—but to love it in spite of its mess. Jesus was born into a messy world to assure us that God is with us in the middle of the mess: our personal mess, our family mess, our national mess, our global mess. Jesus was born to teach us how to love each other so that we can clean up the mess. That is the beautiful assurance of Christmas! It is the life to which we are called. It is the hope that we embrace as we walk into 2020.

Four-year-old grandson Austin had it right. We need to shake the box with the assurance that Jesus is often in unlikely places! Amen