

Victory Lutheran Church- Jacksonville, FL
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Worship Series: A Savior Is Born
Service Theme: Born to Be the True Son

Sermon Theme: Asking God “Why?” (January 1, 2023)
Matthew 2:13-23

In 1824, French artist Leon Cogniet painted a truly striking picture. In it is a young woman, sitting with her body pressed into a corner, hiding behind a broken stone half-wall. She's barefoot, as if she had no time to do anything but run. Clutched tightly in her arms, shielded by her body, is a male toddler, looking as if he's about to cry. The woman holds her hand gently but firmly over his mouth to muffle his cries. Beyond the half-wall in the background are other panicked young women, running frantically while also clutching infants in their arms.

But what I find most striking about Cogniet's painting is the woman's face. It feels like her panicked eyes are piercing your soul; wild, almost animalistic with fear. Her mouth is slightly open, as if she's about to ask the viewer of the painting-- “Why? Why is this happening?”

You understand her fear and confusion when you learn the title of Cogniet's famous painting: ***The Massacre of the Innocents***. Cogniet's painting depicts the horrific account described in Matthew 2. In all honesty, like that panicked woman clutching her baby boy in Bethlehem, I also often feel like asking “Why?” when I read this account. Why does God inspire Matthew to record such a heartbreaking account after the heart-filling accounts of Christmas? Why does this tragic event happen? And why doesn't God do anything to stop it from happening?

Whether you've asked “Why?” about the account the church often refers to as “***The Slaughter of the Holy Innocents***,” or not, I'm sure you've asked God, “Why?” about other things in your life. Or at least felt that question in the deepest depths of your heart or mind. So while

we look to answer the “Why?” of the tragic massacre of Jesus' fellow baby boys in his birthplace of Bethlehem this morning, this account can help us in every life circumstance where we find ourselves **Asking God “Why?”**

But first, let's make sure we understand what's going on here. After Jesus' birth in Bethlehem which we celebrated last week, the holy family stayed in Bethlehem. Possibly up to two years after Jesus was born, Gentile Magi or Wise Men arrived to worship Jesus. After seeing a mysterious star in the sky that alerted them to the birth of a new King of the Jews, the Magi traveled to Jerusalem and asked King Herod, the non-Jew the Romans appointed king over Judea, where they could find the newborn king. The religious leaders in Jerusalem knew Old Testament prophecy well enough to point them to Bethlehem. So the Magi set out for Bethlehem, with Herod's orders to return afterward, and tell him where he could find this newborn king. He claimed he also wanted to worship him, but he really wanted to exterminate this possible threat to his throne.

But God warned the Magi not to return to Herod, so they returned home by a different route. Once Herod realized he'd been duped, he flew into a rage. And when Herod got angry, no one won. The king who went by “The Great” might have been great at constructing and refurbishing great buildings. But when it came to morality, he was anything but “great.”

A ruthless and bloodthirsty tyrant, history records King Herod murdering his wife, three of his sons, his mother-in-law, brother-in-law, uncle, and countless others, to protect his throne from any perceived threat. So the horrific command he gives next shouldn't surprise anyone. ***“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.”***

To clarify, sometimes we picture this terrible slaughter of thousands of baby boys. And in a city like Jacksonville, that would probably be true. But since Bethlehem was a tiny little village, even including the surrounding villages, the number of males two and under was probably

closer to the tens than to hundreds or thousands. That doesn't make Herod's order any less horrific, but it does help us better understand the scene in Bethlehem.

However, 2,000 years removed from the incident and reading it off a page might make it easy for us to gloss over this tragedy. Until we see the terror, confusion, and heartbreak in artwork like Cogniet's. Or when I reflect that one year ago, my son Noah would have been one of those little boys slaughtered for no other reason than a tyrant's insecurity. How many of you would lose sons, grandsons, or siblings? And I'm sure Herod's soldiers didn't take the time to thoroughly explain why Herod had given them this grisly task. So how many parents were left asking God, or no one in particular, "Why? Why did our sons have to die?"

But thankfully, not all the little boys of Bethlehem were killed. Matthew tells us, *"When [the Magi] had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. 'Get up, 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.' So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod."*

While baby Jesus and Mary get most of the attention around Christmas, can we give Joseph a shoutout here? This is the second time Matthew records an angel appearing to Joseph in a dream with a difficult command, and the second time that Joseph wakes up and immediately complies. "Don't be afraid to take Mary home as your wife." And he immediately does. "Get up and take Jesus and Mary to Egypt." And immediately, he wakes up, and does. He doesn't ask God for further explanation of why he should uproot his family from a good situation, and haul them 100+ miles away to stay in Egypt for an indefinite amount of time. He trusts God, and he goes.

And in doing so, saves Jesus' life! But maybe that produces our first "Why?" for God. Why does God spare Jesus' life, but not the rest of the baby boys of Bethlehem? Why didn't God warn the other parents to flee to Egypt too? Or send fire from Heaven to prevent Herod's

soldiers from killing these innocent boys? And by association, why doesn't God prevent the hardship, pain, or suffering in our lives that often leaves us asking God, "Why?"

First, we need to understand that the holy, perfect God is never the author of evil. Evil comes from Satan, his demonic forces, and from sinful people doing the exact opposite of God's law and will. Evil doesn't come from God, it comes from rebellion against God! So we can also rightly say that the God who commands, *"You shall not kill,"* and created mankind to live forever, mourns at such senseless murder as we see in Bethlehem, because it's the exact opposite of what he desires for the world.

But since God created mankind with a free will that allows us to make decisions and act of our own volition, we see horrific acts of evil, like Herod's slaughter of Bethlehem's baby boys, thousands of babies slaughtered by abortion, and mass shootings, taking place in the world. That's why sometimes, like those innocent baby boys and their parents, we endure evil and violence, not by any fault of our own, but simply because we live in a world broken by sin and rebellion against God.

However, since God has perfect knowledge, he has known from eternity how to take each freewill decision and action of mankind, horrific as they might be, and knit them all together to accomplish his perfect plans and eternal purposes for the universe. So while we experience such tragedies that break our hearts, or fracture our lives, God knows how it all fits to accomplish good for those who love him.

While some might accuse God of nepotism for sparing his Son, while allowing all the other baby boys to be killed, the truth is, God needed to save Jesus in order to save those boys—and everyone else!

The church often calls the massacred boys of Bethlehem "The Holy Innocents." Innocent in the sense that they had done nothing to necessitate Herod killing them, not in the sense that they were perfect or innocent of any sin before God. Scripture clearly teaches that we are *"Sinful from birth; sinful from the time our mothers' conceived us."*

So, in order to be saved, all people—including those little boys—need a Savior who would set them free from their slavery to sin.

And so God spares his Son, guiding him safely to Egypt to ensure that he would live long enough to carry out God's perfect plan of salvation. Because God wouldn't spare his Son forever. Instead of leaving his Son in the safety and anonymity of Egypt, after Herod's death, God told Joseph to return to Israel, to the land where he would grow up, living a perfect life under the law—as Paul wrote in Galatians, ***“God sent his Son...born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship.”*** To Israel, where he would be hated and arrested. And this time, God wouldn't spare his Son from a different Roman-appointed political leader who wanted him dead.

Into a world capable of such sin and evil God gave his Son—to save a world capable of such sin and evil. God saved his Son from Herod, so that he could save the world from sin—including for little boys in Bethlehem.

But our heart strings still question God, “Why not still spare these little boys from such a fate?” Maybe we ask the same thing when a child dies or we're robbed of a loved one far too soon. But God's Word gives beautiful reassurance. In Isaiah 57, God says, ***“The righteous perish, and no one ponders it in his heart; devout men are taken away, and no one understands that the righteous are taken away to be spared from evil. Those who walk uprightly enter into peace; they will find rest as they lie in death.”***

While we can't say definitively that 100% of the “holy innocents” of Bethlehem belonged to devout Jewish families, it's likely that most, if not all of those boys had been circumcised as God commanded. Circumcision was God's visible way of bringing baby boys into the covenant relationship he'd established with his people; connecting them to the promise of the Messiah, the Savior. Connecting them to their peer from Bethlehem who was spared so that he could one day give his life for their sins. And that way, God allowing those baby boys of Bethlehem to be killed by Herod was his way of bringing their

souls safely home to him; sparing them from the evil and temptation they would have endured later in life if they'd lived. So as heartbreaking as it is to see little children die, what comfort to think that God was counteracting the evil of Herod, and a far more evil tyrant, by bringing these boys safely to him for eternity.

Sometimes God lets us reflect on struggle, hardship, pain, or loss with 20/20 hindsight, and see exactly what his plan, purpose, and will was to allow us to endure things that make us ask God, “Why?” But sometimes he doesn't. Sometimes, we won't know the answer to the “Why?” until we can ask God in Heaven. But even if we can't fully know why God allows us to endure hardship or pain, we can still trust that he will keep his promises and bless us through it.

First, because this account clearly shows us how God has understood and woven together every decision and action of human history to accomplish his purposes. Three different times, Old Testament prophecies from different eras are fulfilled in just these ten verses of Scripture. Hundreds of years before these events happened, God knew exactly how it would work out. Can we trust that he also knows how to use the things he allows us to face in our lives for our eternal spiritual good as well?

When there doesn't seem to be an answer to our “Why?” it's sometimes best for us to not try to answer. Instead, like Joseph, just trust! “Why?” Because he was willing to sacrifice his Son to save us! That gives us a different perspective as we look into the terrified, broken eyes of the mother in Bethlehem. Because God knows the crushing pain of losing a Son too. But he willingly gave him out of love for us! He saved his Son, so eventually his Son could die to save us-- to make us sons and daughters who will live eternally. Because he was willing to do that for me, however he answers my “Why's?” works for me.