

Is the holy innocents story about the innocents? (Matthew 2:13-23)

"What an awful story," she said. "Why would that story be in the Bible?"

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We sat around the conference table in our church library, our Bibles open to the Gospel of Matthew. We had compared Matthew's genealogy with Luke's; we had read the story of the magi. Now we were studying the story of Herod killing the baby boys in Bethlehem in an attempt to rid himself of a rival for the throne.

Janet read the story out loud. When she finished, Anita said, "That's awful. What an awful story. Why would that story be in the Bible?"

"Great question," I said, grabbing hold of the entry point. "Why is this story in the Bible? Does it remind you of any other stories in the Bible? Even from the Old Testament?"

After a long silence, Jim said, "When God tells Abraham to kill Isaac?"

"Those battle stories," said Erin, "where God tells the Israelites to slaughter everyone, even the cattle."

I nodded, encouraged that they remembered these stories from earlier in our time together, but eager to get to the point. "I see why you see a connection to those stories," I said, "but no, I was thinking of Moses." I was met by blank faces. "What did Pharaoh want to do to the baby boys?" I asked. Still nothing. "Pharaoh wanted to kill them because there were too many Hebrews," I said.

I went on to remind them about how the midwives refused to comply--a dangerous act of defiance. And how Moses's parents put him in a basket of reeds and pitch and then put him in the river, where he was scooped up by Pharaoh's daughter. "In Exodus," I said, "Moses was saved from the king of Egypt in order to lead the Hebrew people out Egypt. Here, Jesus is whisked off to Egypt--and then will return to Israel to save his people. He is the new Moses." I sat back and crossed my arms, satisfied.

"But the babies died," said Jen.

"Well yes, in the story the babies died. Don't read it like it's historical fact, like it actually happened. The author is trying to tell us something else," I said. "Something more important."

"More important than the baby boys dying?" asked Erin.

"But they didn't really die," I said.

"What happened to them, then?" asked Steve.

"No, I mean to say that what matters in reading most of the Bible isn't whether or not something actually happened as historical fact but what it might be saying about God and human beings."

"It doesn't matter if the babies died?" asked Anita.

"That's not what I meant. It matters if they died. But that's not what the story is about. To get the real meaning of the story you have to get past the babies dying."

The class looked at me. Silence stretched between us. The silence was full of the photo on the news of a three-year-old Syrian refugee in red shorts, washed up on shore. It was full of the children still dying in Aleppo—and of the children killed by guns in Chicago, the children who died in Sandy Hook, and the Arapahoe and Cheyenne children who died in the Sand Creek Massacre of 1864. The silence was full of the children dying in Haiti because they don't have clean water and in Somalia because they don't have enough food.

"No," I said. "You don't have to get past the babies dying."