



## The Slaughter of the Innocents

The First Attack on Life

January 9, 2009

Yesterday, Christians around the world celebrated Epiphany, commemorating the visit of the Magi. Epiphany reminds us that God's salvation reached beyond the Jews. Christ would be, as Isaiah foretold, "a light for the Gentiles." He would bring "salvation to the ends of the earth," (49:6) as far as those very kings had traveled.

But things turned decidedly bleak after the Magi departed. Suddenly we see that the Christmas story is more than the stylized Nativity scenes we see on Christmas cards.

The historian Josephus tells us how Herod murdered two of his own sons and his wife because they threatened his power. The gospel of Matthew tells us that Herod also turned his eye to the male infants of Bethlehem.

In the painting "The Slaughter of the Innocents," baroque artist Peter Paul Rubens depicted the horror: a soldier dashing a child against a Roman column, another lancing a mother who tries to hide her babe. The painting also shows a woman weeping over the body of her dead infant. It's a scene from the Bible none of us likes imagining.

Matthew quoted Jeremiah to describe the atrocity: "A voice is heard in Ramah . . . Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted. . . ."

Those who heard Matthew's gospel would have remembered Ramah was where Rachel died in the throes of childbirth before reaching the



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Promised Land. They also would have associated Ramah with the deportation of the Jews during the exile. In that vicinity, the Babylonians tore Israel's children away from their mother's arms and carried them off as slaves.

As Catherine Larson, one of my colleagues, writes in BreakPoint Online, "That evocative solo [of Rachel weeping] would have called forth the agony, the despair, and the tortured Why, of a people waiting in great darkness, of a people not yet home."

As I think about this aspect of that Christmas, I'm reminded that Christmas isn't the saccharine story we've reduced it to. It's more like D-Day. Once Satan realized that God had invaded planet earth, he let loose a vicious counterattack.

And where did Evil strike? It attacked life in its most vulnerable form. The very first assault of Satan after the birth of Christ is against society's weakest members—infants. He attacked the "least of these."

Even today, the Enemy's mode of attack hasn't changed much. We're painfully aware of the slaughter of the unborn, and the devaluation of the elderly, the poor, the disabled, and the prisoner.

But the good news is our Savior has come. He has established the beach-head. And He will have the victory.

So friends, as this New Year begins, we mustn't be deceived. There is a real battle with real casualties. We remember that we wage war not against flesh and blood, "but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."

We shouldn't be surprised at setbacks and assaults upon us. Of course the Enemy won't go down without a fight.

But remember, the Kingdom of Heaven has

been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it. So lay hold of it, and don't let go.

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