

Every year... at this time... (just like many pastors that I know)... I look for fresh sermon illustrations about Christmas... and creative ways of re-telling the very familiar Christmas story - *with as much wonder and excitement that it deserves*. I want to consider the birth of Jesus with you... through *different* lenses... that cause us to observe things we had never really noticed before... or have never previously thought too deeply about.

This year... I stumbled upon a Christmas blog by Russell Moore... which got me to thinking... in ways that I had never viewed Jesus' birth. His blog is titled: "*The Problem With Our Holly, Jolly Christmas Songs.*"

With a title like that... your defenses might easily rise up and ask... "*Problem...? ... There can't possibly be any kind of a problem with being **too** holly and jolly – once we understand Who it is that was born! Angels celebrated and joyously sang Glory in the Highest... and so should we... Mourning and gloom certainly have no part of the Christmas event.*"

Perhaps this excerpt from his blog might re-direct some of your thinking... as it did mine. "*The Problem With Our Holly, Jolly Christmas Songs*" begins with a story about Russel dropping into a local bookstore and overhearing a man talk about why he hated Christmas music. Moore writes:

This guy started by lampooning one pop singer's Christmas album, and I found myself smiling in agreement on how awful it is. But then he went on to say that he hated Christmas music across the board. That's when I started to feel as though I might be in the presence of the Grinch. But then this man explained why he found the music so bad ... It was boring. "Christmas is boring because there's no narrative tension," he said. "It's like reading a book with no conflict."

What do you think? ... Is the man in the bookstore is right? ... ***Is*** the Christmas story really *absent* of conflict...??? – When we stop and think about it... the answer is “no.” ... But the answer can also be “yes”... because of the way it is most often told today.

A Case in point... is *one particular* aspect of the nativity story... that we don't talk very much about. ... It is the Nativity Scene that the Apostle John wrote about... when he was exiled on an Island called Patmos. (Yes... the Book of Revelation does present a manger scene.) John places a red dragon among all the participants at the manger... But how many Christmas cards have you ever received that had a red dragon lurking among the camels and sheep and oxen...? Did your Christmas nativity set (that you put out every year)... include a red dragon... to perch on top of the stable...? ... Common' pastor... a dragon...? Really...? ... Well... yes!...

Revelation 12:4-5 (ESV)

...And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she bore her child he might devour it. She gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne,

John places a dragon at the scene... but the dragon failed! Jesus was born... accomplished what He came here to do... and rose from the dead... back up to Heaven.

*Hark the herald angels sing,
a dragon waits to eat our king.*

From God's viewpoint—and Satan's—Christmas signals far more than the birth of a baby. ... It was an invasion... (the decisive advance in the great struggle for the all of creation.) ... So maybe we should make it...

*Silent night,
violent night,
hell and heaven
meet to fight.*

Indeed... there actually is some strong conflict surrounding the Christmas story. But our Christmas hymns and worship today [often] ignores it... or quickly passes right over it... hardly noticing it at all.

And... there are some unwanted consequences... which result from this. ... To a watching world that only knows darkness and tragedy... as they all tune in to their favorite 24 hour news channel on TV... we look rather foolish. “Joy to the World”...? Really...? Where...? I don’t see it. ... In a time when we seem to learn of a new tragedy each day... (either an evil murderer here in our own country... or a murderous evil dictator on the other side of the world)... the unbearable levity... lightness... and holly-jolly of Christmas... seems rather absurd to those... who are not followers of Christ. ... And... there are (no doubt) many people... who regularly attend a Bible-believing church... while feeling Creation’s groaning... (this world of divorce courts... and cancer cells... and concentration camps.)... To them...our proclamation of “Joy to the World”... seems as likely as there being a real Santa Clause... who lives at the North Pole.

(But please don’t misunderstand me...) ... Of course we should celebrate Christmas - as the angels did - with tremendous joy! (I would never suggest that we don’t.) ... I just wonder if we would be able to celebrate with greater joy... if we sought a better balance and bigger perspective. ... Maybe there is a danger to our minimizing the narrative tension... which is definitely part of the story.

Wouldn't the hope and joy of Christmas shine even more **bright**... if it were seen against the black backdrop... which **is** clearly present? (Jewelry stores always arrange their cultured pearls and best diamonds on black velvet displays... Their beauty stands-out more clearly against the black.)

Now... I have already brought to your attention... the image of the red dragon at the manger. ... (We won't spend any more time on that one. ... I just wanted to prove to you that there was conflict - an **enormous** amount!) ... But there is... yet **another** picture of conflict surrounding the birth of Christ... And this one seems to get more attention... than the Book of Revelation's nativity scene. ... Matthew two is where it is found... but it is very often quickly passed over... disregarded... or curtailed. ... We are not going to treat it that way... this morning.

This morning I want us to linger... just a bit... in some of the darkness that surrounds Christmas. ... Do I want to make you feel gloomy...? Nah! Of course not! I wouldn't do that! ... It's Christmas! ... No... I would (instead) like for you to feel (for just a few minutes) a sense of **horror**. ... My hope is that you will feel some of the gut-wrenching emotion that an Old Testament human author... and a New Testament human author... seem to have wanted us... (as their readers)... to feel...

Now... in order to get us to slow down and feel the narrative tension... Ummm... I **may** ... take a **little** dramatic license... with what the Bible narrative suggests *COULD HAVE HAPPENED* ... But... I promise to stay close to it's overall message... My comments about this event... will be an adaptation from another blog... by *John McCallum*. (I will tone his words down a bit... to make it more fitting for a Christmas sermon...)

Hopefully... by now... you know why it is that I am doing this... and I hope that you can appreciate what my aim is... (and more importantly... what the aim is - of the authors of Scripture.) ... It is to elicit an even greater impact of joy... once we emerge from this narrative tension... which... as I've said... often gets **played down** in the telling of Christmas.

First we will read it from the Scripture... (in sections)... followed by my talking about it... And one of those sections... will touch upon it's very gruesome nature.

Matthew 2:1-2

So... we have just read here... that there were wise men from the East — also known as “magi.” ... These were astrologers (of a sort)... who had noticed a new star in the sky. ... Magi were a mixture of philosopher... scientist... and well-educated thinkers. ... ALSO... They were (in their culture – Persia)... what the Levites were to Israel — Magi were priests. Their work involved teaching and instructing the kings of Persia. Such a role required the men to study - **a lot**. They absorbed themselves in world events... world literature... and ancient traditions.

Do you remember Israel's prophet Daniel...? In our Bibles... we read how God elevated Daniel over **all** the Magi in Persia. The Book of Daniel ends with him still in that position. So... for many years... Daniel influenced the Persian culture of Priestly Magi.

Part of Daniel's prophecy that we have today in our Old Testament... (Daniel 9:24-26)... gives an accurate timeline. It tells how many years it would be until Israel's Messiah would come. ... I have preached sermons

on this before... showing how precise Daniel's prophecy was... in revealing the time of Messiah's coming. ... (How absurd it would be to think that Daniel would not have left such a record for the Magi Priests to study and to be watching.)

The Magi who came from the East in the Christmas story... (when they were still in Persia)... knew that the time was near... and were probably looking for a star to verify it's truth. Daniel... I am sure... would have also told the society of Magi Priests about another prophecy in the Book of Numbers. That prophecy foretold a future star that would represent a special king for Israel.

Can you imagine their joy... when they put Daniel's prophecy... and the prophecy in Numbers together...? They knew the timing of the Messiah's birth (thanks to Daniel) and they knew that an unusual star would appear to verify that it was true (thanks to Numbers). ... So when the magi saw the new and unusual star... they knew something was up —something **big** was happening. ... Their calculations from Jewish prophecy told them that they needed to begin their search in Judea... so that's where they went.

The wise men arrived... and Herod was paranoid

Matthew 2:3-11

After many hot days and cold nights in the desert... the wise men made their way up the mountain into Jerusalem... and started asking around...
"Can you tell us where we might find the King of the Jews? We have seen his star... and we have come to worship him. Can anyone tell us where we

might find him?" Some people shrugged their shoulders at the question... others looked dumbfounded... and others ran with it... turning it into Jerusalem's latest bit of juicy gossip: "*So, have you heard about the new King of the Jews? There's a bunch of Persian astrologers asking about him.*" Before long... all Jerusalem was abuzz about it.

The word even made its way to the palace... **and** to the ears of Herod the Great... (the ruling king of the Jews.) ... Since the Romans ruled the place... Herod was a **figurehead**... more than anything else. But he fashioned himself "a high king"... and he ruthlessly exercised the power that he **did** have.

The news of a new "King of the Jews" stirred Herod's **worst** paranoia. Herod was an evil man... and a merciless cut-throat. He was a ruler who was not beyond killing his own wife and children... if he felt they were a threat to his power. ... "Murder"... was his middle name.

(Case in point)... .. When Herod realized his own death was near... he ordered the arrests of the leading citizens of all the villages. ... They were to be killed at the news of Herod's death... so that at least some tears would be shed on the day this wicked king died. (Can you even **begin** to imagine...?!!!) ... Herod's men never completed that plan... but that's the kind of man Herod **was**... to even ask for this.

Herod was upset by the news of a new King of the Jews showing up in Judea. ... When Herod heard the news... his face grew red... a vein bulged in his forehead... and his blood pressure shot up 50 points. ... He took some deep breaths... composed himself... and called for the priests. He

asked them... *"Do you know anything about this? Where is this king, this Christ, supposed to be born?"*

The priests gathered together in a circle for an impromptu huddle... There was quiet chatter... the nodding of heads... and finally the huddle broke. ... *"Yes, your eminence, we think we do,"* they responded. *"The prophet Micah predicted that this king would be born in Bethlehem."*

"Bethlehem, huh?" Herod scratched his chin... and looked at the floor. One could almost see the wheels turning in his head and a light come on. Then Herod dismissed the priests.

He secretly summoned the magi. Herod said to them:

*"I hear you've come to our fair little country to find and worship the King of the Jews. How lovely! I do hope you are enjoying your stay. ... I called you here because I think that (maybe) I can shorten your search. ... The prophecies say that this king for whom you search... is to be born in Bethlehem... (a dirty little town just a few miles south of here.) ... Say(!)... I've got a wonderful idea. ... Why don't you gentlemen go on to Bethlehem... find this new king... then come back and tell me right where he is... so that **I** can go and worship him too."*

The magi... (so-called "wise men")... smiled and nodded in agreement. (You know... they might have been wise... but (at this time)... they were not very discerning.) ... They spent their time in Herod's presence and never smelled a skunk. They thanked Herod for his help.

When the magi left Herod's quarters... Herod swirled the wine in his royal goblet and said to himself, *"Worship him? Yes, I'll worship him—I'll worship*

him with the sharp edge of a sword. There is only one king in Judea—and that king is me!" ... And then... lifting his glass in a toast to himself... Herod sneered... "Long live Herod the Great! ... Long live me... heh...heh...heh..."

It wasn't long until the magi arrived in Bethlehem and found the child-king in a little home there. ... Little Jesus was almost two years old. They worshiped the little toddler... Who could barely walk... offering elaborate gifts of gold... frankincense... and myrrh.

"It's been a good day," said one magi to the others... at the end of that day. *"Our long search has been rewarded. Rest well, my brothers. Come morning we must get an early start to Jerusalem to tell King Herod where to find the child."*

But the magi didn't rest well. God disturbed their sleep with a dream—a warning dream not to return to Herod.

Matthew 2:12

That wasn't the only dream in Bethlehem. The night after the magi headed home... Joseph... (the man God chose to be the earthly father for Jesus)... also had a dream.

Matthew 2:13-15

Joseph dreamed an angel appeared to him with this warning, *"Get up now! Grab the child and his mother and head to Egypt. ... Stay there until I tell*

you the coast is clear. ... Herod is about to come looking for Jesus to murder him."

Joseph didn't roll over and go back to sleep. He got up... woke Mary... told her to grab the baby... and threw a few things in knapsack. They hit the trail for Egypt in the middle of the night.

It's a good thing they left. The angel was right. Herod... the original Grinch who tried to steal Christmas... wanted Jesus dead.

Matthew 2:16-18

Herod was such a murderous tyrant... Caesar Augustus once quipped that it was safer to be Herod's pig... than Herod's son. ... It was also safer to be Herod's pig - than a little boy in Bethlehem! ... A man like Herod doesn't wait well... and doesn't wait for very long. ... Herod was antsy and hadn't slept a wink since he heard the news of this new king. ... His eyes were bloodshot with weariness... and underlined with dark... deep circles. ... In his sleeplessness... Herod was more cranky than usual. ... Within a couple of days... he assumed his plan had gone awry. ... He pounded his fist on the arm of his throne: "*Those magi have double-crossed me! Who knows where they are? I know where that baby king is, and he is going to die.*"

Herod would stand for no rival to his throne... so he did what kings often did in that day (and this one too) - he ordered murder. He called the head of his secret police—his Gestapo—and said, "*Trying to find the right kid among so many will be like looking for a needle in a haystack. Besides that,*

we'll tip our hand—the kid's parents may get word of what we're up to and make a run for it."

Based on what the magi told him about the timing of the star's appearance... Herod made his calculations and gave his orders to his secret police. "*The child should be at least one-year-old, so just to be on the safe side, kill every baby boy you see that is two-years-old and younger,*" Herod said. "*Just kill them all and surely we'll murder this baby-king in the process.*" ... Herod gave the order with a cold detachment that would make a normal person's skin crawl.

But Herod's Gestapo had no problem with this. It was simply "another day at the office." ... They swapped jokes and told stories as they sharpened their swords and dressed in their armor.

"*Mount up!*"... the shout eventually came from their captain. ... Then they were off... on a gallop down the mountain to Bethlehem... as the moonlight cast eerie shadows... of horse and rider on their way to a massacre.

Meanwhile in Bethlehem... little boys were playing in their homes. Some were down for the night in peaceful sleep. Others were being rocked in mothers' arms when suddenly it was unsettled by the sound of thundering hoof-beats... Herod's men came **barging** into homes... flashing their swords against each home's flickering lamp light... and the night air was filled with horrible screams of terrified children... and parents. ... One minute their boys were fine... seconds later they were unresponsive — all of them... brutally massacred.

Based on population estimates... historians conclude that anywhere from 30 to 60 boys... and probably a few dads and moms who tried to step in and stop the massacre... were murdered in Bethlehem that night. (It was more than innocent children who never saw the light of the following day.)

When Herod's police came back with the news that the mission was accomplished... Herod nodded and grinned... enjoyed a steak... drank a clay flask of cabernet... and went to bed... and slept like a... .. baby.

There was no sleeping in Bethlehem that night. There were just gallons of tears... inconsolable grief... and mothers weeping for their children... refusing to be comforted. Comforters tried to help. One put her arm around a grieving mother with an emotionless far-off look... too much in shock to know anyone else was present... yet with just enough awareness to push the comforter away. ... Another comforter said, "*It will be all right.*" ... But this grieving mother... who had lost both her husband and her son... only acknowledged her comforter by looking at her with a glare that could burn a hole in her soul. ... Still another... tried to get a hysterical mama to calm down... but the woman's hysteria deepened... and she wailed all the louder. ... A rabbi tried to pray with a mother who was still holding her lifeless son's lacerated body in her arms... This woman was not interested in prayers. All over Bethlehem – sobs! ... Tears! ... Shrieks of "*No, God, No!*"

There aren't enough words to describe the evil perpetrated in Bethlehem that night. ... But it was... very much... just like the prophet Jeremiah had predicted so many centuries before:

Jeremiah 31:15 (ESV)

“A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more.”

This is part of the Christmas story? Yes... it is. ... Matthew tucks it right into his story of Jesus' birth. ... It's a troubling story. ... Why would God sit on his hands and allow such an atrocity to be done to children?

God warned *Joseph* to take his child out of Bethlehem. ... Would it have been so hard for God to warn the other dads in the city?

The story is troubling... and yet it's still a **Christmas** story and even a gospel story. ... You might get eye strain... looking for the good news in this sad story... but there **is** some there.

God sent his only Son to be born into a world like this... a world where kings abuse power... people are victimized... and children are murdered... a world where children suffer and parents weep for them... a world where Satan has a foothold and where evil appears to win as many battles as it loses (and sometimes even more.) ... This is what people cynically call "the real world." ... This is a world that non-followers of Jesus see... and ask "What joy to the world?"

Folks! The real event of Christmas happened in the real world - our world.

If you can see past the blood and the violence... there **is** good news. In the baby Jesus... God entered **this world**... this corrupt... evil... unjust... devil-serving... sin-loving... war-mongering (...and yes) baby-killing world.

God entered this world. ... He didn't wait until it was safe. He didn't make it easier for Jesus... than it would be for anyone else. ... God didn't send Jesus to a rich family that lived in the lap of luxury. ... He didn't place Jesus under the protection of friendly government... have Him be born in a state-of-art hospital... or make reservations for His family at the Waldorf Astoria.

God entered this world — the real world... our world — just as it is - with all its attending evils and dangers. ... Before His Son could say one controversial word... or do one eyebrow raising deed... the powers-that-be tried to snuff Him out. As the red dragon waited to devour Him... God entered this world. ... God came to this world not with a sword in His hand but with a cross on his back.

(LISTEN!) ... Jesus came not to destroy this broken... sinful world - but to redeem it.

That redemption would cost a high price — a price paid in Jesus' blood for the forgiveness of our sins.

Yes... Jesus got a pass on that wicked... bloody night in Bethlehem. ... God warned Joseph in a dream to grab Mary and the Baby... and skedaddle to Egypt. ... Jesus did escape slaughter in Bethlehem. ... He had a mission to accomplish... and it wasn't His time to die. ... His time to die would come some thirty-three years later on a hill outside Jerusalem... (where another ruler flogged the living daylights out of Him... and then killed Him on a cross.) ... No sword for Jesus - but nails and a spear.

In the Bethlehem massacre... Herod thought he'd gotten the best of Jesus. Herod had not. ... In the Jerusalem crucifixion... the powers that killed Jesus thought they had gotten the best of Jesus, too. ... They had not. ... Jesus rose from the dead!

Jesus came to redeem the world... and He redeemed the world through a cross. ... He sealed that redemption with the resurrection. ... **That** was God's plan. ... The cross and the resurrection and the promise of Jesus' return... remind us that evil **doesn't** get the last word. ... God gets the final word.

That's gospel. ... That's good news. ... That means that even though we live in a world... where evil sometimes sits on the throne... (people murder children... and good people suffer all manner of things)... **we can live in the peace of Christ** -- because we know how the story ends! ... And because we know... that **until** the story ends... God is with us in Christ.

He is with us —today! ... He is with us — no matter **what** comes! ... He is with us when we **laugh**... and when we **cry**. ... He is with us when we **celebrate**... and when we **suffer**. ... He is with us all the way to the **end** of the story! ... **This** is the end of the story - **Jesus wins**... **Herods lose**... **justice prevails**... **evil is vanquished**. ... Light — God's light — extinguishes darkness forever.

Yes! Joy to the World – the Lord has come. Let earth receive her king!

May **YOU** receive Him as your king!