

“Perhaps no event in the gospel more determinatively challenges the sentimental depiction of Christmas than the death of these children. Jesus is born into a world in which children are killed, and continue to be killed, to protect the power of tyrants.”

Encountering The Massacre of the Innocents

Celebrating the birth of a newborn King at Christmas is juxtaposed with the days immediately following. In the church’s tradition the day after (December 26) is the Feast of St. Stephen, Deacon and Martyr who was stoned to death for his faith. Two days later is the Feast of the Holy Innocents on December 28th. This is not the warm, fuzzy, and sentimental Christmas scene we are drawn to at Christmas. And it is often ignored as its commemoration day often falls mid-week when most do not hear the Scriptures read in our lectionary.

We have a parallel reading from the Old Testament. In the Exodus account ([Exodus 1:8-2:4](#)), the birth of Moses occurred at a time when an unnamed Egyptian Pharaoh had commanded that all male Hebrew children born be killed by drowning in the river Nile. Jochebed, the wife of the Levite Amram, bore a son and kept him concealed for three months.

Teaching This Story

Sharing this story with children is also difficult, let alone adults. How do we deal with such biblical stories in which the innocent die? Madeline L’Engle in [The Glorious Impossible](#) uses the frescoes of Giotto to depict the seven classical moments of the infancy narrative in Matthew and Luke, including the [Massacre of the Innocents](#). Jerome Berryman uses this story in “The Mystery of Christmas” lesson from [The Complete Guide to Godly Play, Volume 3: Lessons for Winter](#). It is an enrichment story, meaning it is for older children. Before showing Giotto’s illustration of the Massacre of the Innocents, he believes an introduction is needed due to the terrible events it depicts. The Godly Play lesson reads as follows:

“It is part of the story that many leave out, because it is too sad.” And the scene is set for the arrival of the Magi. “It was a terrible thing. The mothers and fathers were very sad. You can see that many babies have already been killed. The soldiers took them from their mothers. No one really looks happy in the picture, not even Herod. Look at the

mothers' eyes. The artist tried to make them look very, very sad. See how long and narrow they are? I guess the story is over then, isn't it? No. The baby Jesus did not die in Bethlehem."

The lesson then tells of Joseph's dream and the Holy Family's escape to Egypt.

Relating To This Story

This is as much a part of our faith today as it is in reading Scripture. We see children suffering and dying through malnutrition and war in the news daily. It is easy to look the other way. Stanley Hauerwas ("Matthew" - *Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible*, 2006) states:

"Perhaps no event in the gospel more determinatively challenges the sentimental depiction of Christmas than the death of these children. Jesus is born into a world in which children are killed, and continue to be killed, to protect the power of tyrants [like Herod]."

We are left to wonder, where was God 2,000 years ago. And today. May our prayers remember those innocent in our world today who die at the hand of tyranny. The hope of Christmas is that the Christ child remains among us, forever and ever until the end of time.

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Artwork: Massacre of the Innocents by Giotto. 1304-1306. (Fresco located in Capella degli Scrovegni, Padua, Italy)