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HEROD THE GREAT

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men,
he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in
and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under,
according to the time that he had learned from the wise men.

MATTHEW 2:16

Herod the Great gazed upon the death of his kingdom. Perhaps a dozen figures cloaked in shadow stood behind the royal herald. Afternoon sun streamed through the windows far above, and lit candles decorated every fixture along the walls. Still, light did not quite reach the magi. Where their dark skin showed through their embroidered silk robes, Herod could discern inscrutable messages written in ink. Amulets hung from chains, and stones adorned every finger, hung from ears, and—Herod had no doubt—lay hidden in secret pockets and folds. Veils gave the only indication that at least three of them were women. Ancient power pulsed from the group, who stood silent, heads bowed in respect.

The herald cleared his throat, and though his hands shook, his voice did not. “May I present to His Grace the magicians of Parthia. They come bearing greetings from his august majesty Arsaces of Parthia, the twenty-fourth of his name, king of kings and lord of lords.” The herald paused and glanced back toward the magi. Now

his voice did shake. “These humble servants have come to pay homage to the newborn king of the Jews.”

Herod stood slowly, his hand heavy on the golden lion that was his armrest so that his knees did not shake. He scanned the throne room, wondering for the hundredth time that day which of his courtesans were spies for Augustus. No eyes met his, of course. Who there was taking careful note of every word? Who would scurry from there to report to Rome all Herod said and did?

The king smiled wide and friendly down at the dark figures. “Welcome, beloved friends. I apologize for my herald. I will have him replaced with one who understands your beautiful language. I hear your meaning, and thank you for your visit.” As the herald withered in terror, Herod gestured to the newly crowned prince. “My son and heir, Herod Antipas, thanks your master, Arsaces, for his kind consideration of us. Tonight we shall hold a feast in your honor, and of course we will celebrate the new prince of Israel.”

As Herod collapsed back onto his throne, one of the magicians stepped forward. He cut off the herald’s translation and spoke in perfect Aramaic. “Your Grace, the problem is not one of language.” Frowning, Herod leaned forward in his chair. “I am Malchior, Your Grace, and we are well aware of the treacherous actions of your son Antipater II—how he tried to kill you and so was stripped of his crown. We wish your son Herod Antipas long life and health, but we have come to offer homage to the newborn king of the Jews.”

Herod’s smile slipped only slightly. The magi were uncharacteristically blunt for diplomats. Perhaps he could rid himself of them all the more quickly. “I apologize, friends, but there seems to be some mistake. No new king has been born.”

Malchior was undeterred. He swept his arm in the air over his head, flashes of light trailing from his fingers. “Your Grace, the stars do not lie. We observed his star when it rose many months

ago. Change is written in the heavens, noble Herod. So did our wise king Arsaces—may his rule endure forever—bid us to journey to you that we might offer the good will of Parthia to this king of Israel.” As Malchior spoke, his voice became louder word by word, until though he did not shout, his voice boomed through the throne room.

Herod glowered. “Your tricks are impressive, Master Malchior. I have no doubt your knowledge of the skies is even more so. If what you say is true—and of course it is—we must consult our own sacred books. Would you give me leave to consider with my scribes? Please, enjoy the hospitality of my house.”

Malchior bowed. “Might we offer to assist your scribes, Your Grace? Perhaps our knowledge can augment their search.”

“Your journey has been long, my friends. You need not trouble yourselves with such a simple matter. Please, rest. I will send for you tomorrow.” Herod summoned a slave. “Prepare quarters in Caesar’s wing. Be sure they enjoy every hospitality we have to offer.” *And, Herod thought, let them remember who I serve.*

Malchior bowed again, this time silent.

No sooner had they left the throne room than Herod hauled himself painfully to his feet. Antipas came to help him down the long steps, but Herod slapped his hand away and spat at him, “Fool! Assemble the scribes. All of them. In my private chambers. *Now!*”

As his son scurried away, the old king limped painfully down the steps.



Herod limped into his council chambers, hushing raised voices to whispers. He scanned the sycophants and hypocrites, chief among them his new high priest, Matthias. Herod gained his seat and asked, “What truth is there to this story?”

Matthias rushed to assure his king. “We have scoured the prophecies, Your Grace, and we see no reason to give these magicians any credence. The Lord frowns on sorceries and auguries in any case. Why would he announce this to the Gentiles but not to his own people? No, we should thank them and send them on their way.”

“Fool,” Herod spat. “I don’t speak of prophecies. Has a Hasmonean usurper been born? Or someone of David’s line?”

“No, Your Grace, nothing of substance. Just whispers and rumors.”

“Fool!” Herod’s tone was as cold as iron. “Rumors have destroyed better men than you.

“Tell me, Matthias. What will Augustus think when he hears a *rumor* that an envoy from his enemies in the East has met with us? What will the Caesar of Rome do when he hears a *rumor* that a new king of the Jews has been born, though I have told him nothing of the sort? Will these *rumors* put him in a merciful state of mind?”

Before Matthias could answer, Herod continued. “When Rome with her legions descends on Jerusalem from the west and Parthia’s cavalry rides upon us from the east, will whispers and rumors save your wretched life and the lives of your wife and children?”

Matthias, white as his temple garments, stammered, “N—no, Your Grace.”

“Then let us pray your foolishness has not doomed us all. Tell me what you have heard.”

A voice called out from the back of the chamber, “The Messiah has been born. We should prepare the path of the Lord.” It came from an old priest, nearly hidden by his fellows. His eyes shone with the unmistakable glow of religious zeal.

Others began to shout him down, but Herod slammed his fist on the table and demanded silence. “Who are you, priest? Tell me what you mean.”

The old man shuffled forward. “I am Zechariah, son of Simeon, a priest of the order of Abijah. Like our father Abraham, the Lord did not see fit to grant me a child, even unto old age. And like our mother, Sarah, my wife, Elizabeth, conceived though she was advanced in years. A messenger of the Lord announced his birth and promised he was Elijah returned to prepare our people for the Messiah.”

Another priest—one of Matthias’s minions, judging from where he stood, tried again to shout Zechariah down. “We preferred your vow of silence, you old goat. Shall we hold a triumph for this so-called Messiah because you finally learned how to make a child?”

Zechariah did not rise to the bait, Herod noted. He only replied with the assurance of the prophets of old. “The Messiah has been born. Ask those who live in Bethlehem. We must prepare the way.”

“Why Bethlehem?” Herod growled at Matthias.

“The rumors, Your Grace.” Matthias glared daggers at Zechariah. “Some months ago, word reached us that a child had been born in Bethlehem. A child of David’s line.”

Herod’s voice was a sword against the high priest’s throat. “Why am I only now hearing of this?”

Seeing a chance to shift blame away from himself, Matthias blurted, “Simon was high priest then, Your Grace. He did not deem the information worthy of your attention.”

“Simon was plotting with my treacherous son to poison me. Of course he withheld information about a child Messiah!” Matthias shrank back as Herod’s voice rose. “But I installed *you* in his place for your loyalty to the crown. So why did *you* not tell me at once?”

Matthias sputtered apologetically, “Your Grace, by the time I was installed, the rumors had been investigated. We traced them

to a group of shepherds who claimed to have received the revelation through angelic messengers.” Matthias gulped.

Zechariah interjected again. “The Lord told the prophet Micah, ‘You, Bethlehem of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.’ The Lord promised Ezekiel that he would send a just shepherd to root out all the wicked men who exploit the poor and abuse his sheep.” As he spoke, Zechariah looked squarely at Matthias. “Why should we be surprised that the Lord chose to announce the coming of this shepherd first to shepherds?”

Matthias turned to Zechariah and said with disdain, “They are shepherds. Worthless men. Who would believe they are heralds of the Messiah?”

Herod cut him off with a roar. “Enough! You are nearly as great a threat as was Simon. A small mercy that I am betrayed by your foolishness rather than your plotting. It matters not whether this messiah has been born. What matters is that people may *believe* he has been born. How did David take the throne from Saul? Because the people loved him. And how did Rehoboam lose the kingdom of his father, Solomon? Because the people were against him. How did noble Augustus defeat Mark Antony to take his rightful place as Caesar? *Because the people love him.*

“We have enjoyed peace for more than thirty years. And you think rumors of a child who is the Messiah do not deserve my attention? When this child has prophecies and rumors of angelic messengers behind him, you think I should not be troubled by this scrap of trivia?”

Herod found he had somehow gained his feet and was shouting, “I learn of this first when magicians from Parthia knock at the doors to my palace, claiming the very stars announced his birth? *This* is when you deem in your great wisdom that I should learn of it?”

Matthias cowered before Herod's legendary rage. He stammered, "Your G—Grace."

"*Out!*" Herod roared. "When I am ready to surrender my kingdom to fools and half-wits, I will call for you again!"

The priests and scribes left as quickly as they could. Only Antipas and his top general remained behind. Herod's rage cooled as the room emptied, and he turned to practical matters. "We must rid ourselves of these magicians as quickly as possible."

The general cleared his throat. "Your Grace, Parthia is strong, and a much closer neighbor than Rome. We should consider making this visit the beginning of a—fruitful friendship."

Herod turned to him. "Eliab, how is it my oldest friend speaks the words of a traitor?"

"Only a fool does not weigh every option. And my king is no fool."

Herod growled, "The fool is he who believes a choice between Rome and the whole world is any choice at all. We must let it be known in no uncertain terms that Herod is no friend of Parthia."

Eliab held Herod's gaze but nodded his assent.

"We have until the morning." Herod sat back in his chair and closed his eyes. "How can we rid ourselves of these troublesome magicians? And how will we deal with this would-be messiah?"



Herod sat once again on his throne. The herald announced the arrival of the magicians, his practiced pronunciation markedly more fluid than his predecessor's. Once again, the magicians stood shrouded in silence and shadow. Once again, Malchior stepped forward to speak for them, but Herod spoke first. "Great magicians of Parthia, we thank you for your visit. Clearly the wisdom of Parthia exceeds our own. At your behest, my wisest

scribes have searched our holy books and have discerned that this newborn king of the Jews of whom you speak is our long-awaited messiah. We are greatly shamed that we who have awaited his birth so long have failed to welcome him. We wish to make amends. Clearly we have much to learn from a friendship with Parthia. Will you share your wisdom with us, that we might welcome our God's anointed?"

Malchior gave no indication that Herod's more conciliatory tone surprised him. He merely bowed and said, "Parthia is pleased to call Israel a friend. How may we be of service?"

"We know the Messiah is to be born in Bethlehem. It is a village not far from here. Its only value is as the ancestral home of our greatest king. Tell us, when was he born? When did his star appear?"

"The star appeared nearly two years ago, Your Grace. Thank you for your help. We will set out for Bethlehem immediately."

"Might I ask one further kindness of you?" Herod forced himself to remain relaxed as he laid his trap.

"Of course, Your Grace. How might Parthia be of service?"

"When you have found the child, return here and tell us how we too might go and worship him. Israel has been too long without her true king."

Malchior bowed again. "It will be as you say, Your Grace."

After the magicians left, Herod looked at Eliab. The general nodded and said, "My two best spies await them in Bethlehem."

"Good." Herod did not notice how his own voice shook. "If we cannot lay hands on the child before word of the Parthians reaches Augustus, we are finished."



Herod limped once more into his council chamber, where Eliab stood waiting for him. The old king gained his seat and dismissed

his cupbearer. Once they were alone, he snapped, "What news of Bethlehem? It's been nearly a week already."

Eliab scowled. "The magicians are not in Bethlehem, Your Grace. Neither have they returned to Jerusalem. I believe they have returned to Parthia."

"No!" Herod hurled his goblet at the general. Eliab did not acknowledge the assault nor that the goblet fell well short of him, splashing his sandals with wine. "Did I not tell you to send your best spies?"

The general's scowl deepened. "The two I sent after the Parthians are the finest in Israel, Your Grace. I trust them both with my life."

"That seems to have been a mistake," Herod growled ominously.

"Your Grace, they are magicians of Parthia. Did you honestly expect we could spy on them if they did not wish it? Did you expect we could demand anything of them they were not willing to offer? We know not how they escaped, save that it was by magical means. We know not where the child is, but Bethlehem is a small village. We will search it. We will discover the child. I'll begin a discreet investigation."

"No." Herod's anger gave way to fear as he traced out the implications of the magi's betrayal. "If the magicians found this messiah, his family will flee at the first sign of danger. We cannot afford discretion."

"Very well, Your Grace. I'll have the child brought to you immediately."

"No. It is too late for that. If the emperor's spies have not already sent word to Rome, they will soon. We must leave no doubt we belong to Augustus."

Herod was silent for a moment. "How many boys with two years or fewer do you suppose live in Bethlehem?"

“Surely no more than six or seven, Your Grace.”

“Seven boys.” Herod barely hesitated. “Kill them all.”

“Your Grace?”

“You heard me. Kill every boy two years or younger in Bethlehem. What is better: seven boys today or seven hundred when the legions of Rome descend on us? Go and kill these boys. Let the wailing of their mothers announce to Augustus we have no love for Parthia or their magicians.”

“Yes, Your Grace.” Eliab paused as he turned to leave. “Do you think it’s true? Has the Messiah been born?”

“It makes no difference.” The old king’s voice was iron, and he tightened his weak grip on his chair. “What hope has the god of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob against the might of Rome? Messiah or not, this child will die—for the good of us all.”

BETWEEN ROME AND A HARD PLACE

Living in a World of Impossible Choices

One of my favorite films is *Gone Baby Gone*.¹ It's a noir detective story that illustrates a truth we don't like to admit: sometimes there's no good decision. Private Detective Patrick Kenzie and his partner/lover Angie Gennaro are hired by the family of four-year-old Amanda McCready, who has been kidnapped. They quickly learn that Amanda's mother is a drug addict and destitute. She loves her daughter but is too wrapped up in her own life to provide a stable home.

As the case twists and turns, Patrick and Angie ultimately find little Amanda safe and sound in the home of a couple whose own daughter had been kidnapped and killed as a child.

Patrick and Angie face an impossible choice: Amanda has been kidnapped and clearly should be returned to her birth mother. But her life would be far better if she remained where she was, with two adoptive parents who not only love her but prioritize her. Both options are right, and both options are wrong.

The lack of a good choice is precisely why many people don't like noir as a genre. We watch movies or read books to escape from reality. We want to live in a world—even if it's just for a

couple of hours—in which we know who the good guys are and that they always win. Noir forces us to acknowledge that reality is rarely as clear cut as we wish.

The impulse to avoid the gray shades of reality is why we don't read Herod's part of the Christmas story when we gather to sing "Silent Night" and light candles. We can't imagine celebrating the birth of Jesus alongside the deaths of Bethlehem's infant sons. But for Matthew, Herod is integral to the story of Jesus' birth. He wants us to view Herod as a corrupt, foolish king, the antithesis of what a true king of God's people should be. Between the lines of Matthew's story, the real Herod peeks through. If we look closely, we see a king who feels trapped in an impossible situation, a king who marshals all his considerable cunning to find a way out.

DÉJÀ VU ALL OVER AGAIN

Why does the appearance of the Magi trigger such a violent response from Herod? The traditional nativity scene features three well-dressed men, often of indeterminate ethnic origin, holding little boxes of gifts. The so-called three wise men gather at the manger with the shepherds and the Holy Family, come to worship newborn baby Jesus. Both shepherds and kings kneeling before the God of the universe lying in a manger is visually striking, but nearly every element of our depiction of the magi is made up.

For starters, the Bible never says there were three of them—they brought *three gifts*, but they are not numbered.² Further, they don't appear in the manger scene because they don't arrive in Judea until Jesus is two years old. Our nativity scenes are a composite: Luke's framework—the manger, shepherds, and angelic choir, with the good bits of Matthew's story squeezed in.

So who are these magi? Matthew tells us they were "from the East" (Matthew 2:1). East of Israel was Parthia, the heir to old

Persia and an empire that caused Rome no end of trouble. The word *magi* comes to Greek from Persia, where it referred to the priestly caste of the Zoroastrian religion. Part and parcel of their work was reading the stars. Hence, when Herod asked the purpose of their visit, they told him they were looking for the newborn king of the Jews because they “observed his star at its rising” (Matthew 2:2).³

The three wise men of our nativity scenes seem to have been envoys from Parthia. They read in the stars that a new king of the Jews had been born. Parthia was anxious to capitalize on the regime change, so they made preparations for the thousand-mile journey. The magicians arrived in the capital city, Jerusalem (where else would one seek out a newborn king?), only to discover that the current regime had no idea what had taken place. Their presence generated a good bit of confusion at the palace.

Herod, for his part, had seen this before. The first forty years of his life had been constant warfare as the independent Israelite Hasmonean dynasty imploded.⁴ His father, Antipater, was an adviser to the last Hasmonean king. During the Hasmonean civil war, Antipater appealed to Rome, which swooped in to quell the conflict in the person of the great general Pompeii.

It was 63 BCE. Herod was somewhere around ten years old when Pompeii's legions breached the walls of Jerusalem and broke into the temple. Pompeii himself entered the temple, trampling the holy of holies. For Herod, raised Jewish, such an act would have been unthinkable. God's holiness was dangerous even to Jews.⁵ God's holiness was most concentrated at the temple, in the holy of holies (a very Hebrew way of saying “the holiest place”). Inside the holy of holies dwelled God's physical presence on earth. Even the Jewish high priest could enter only once a year, on the Day of Atonement.⁶ Any Jew would be devastated to see a Gentile

trampling the holy of holies. Pompeii the Great, general of the Roman legions, sent a clear message: Yahweh is no match for Rome.

Herod grew to adulthood in a world of shifting allegiances and constant war both in Israel and in Rome. After Julius Caesar was assassinated in 44 BCE, Rome fell into a civil war between Brutus, Cassius, and the Roman Senate and the alliance of Mark Antony and Octavian, Caesar's adopted son and heir. Antony had become impressed with Herod, so he named Herod the king of the Jews and charged him to bring Israel fully under Rome's control.

Because Herod's parents weren't Hasmonean, Herod knew his claim to the throne was weak in the eyes of the Jewish people. He divorced his first wife, Doris, and banished her and her son, Antipater II, so he could marry Mariamne I, a Hasmonean princess. In 37 BCE, he defeated his final enemy and became king of the Jews in name and in practice.⁷

Herod's victory would mean four decades of peace for Judea after twenty-five years of near-constant warfare. But unrest in Rome threatened Herod's crown. After Antony and Octavian defeated Brutus and Cassius, they tried unsuccessfully to rule together—Octavian from Rome and Antony from Egypt.⁸ Their conflict devolved into war yet again, and Octavian emerged triumphant in 31 BCE. Octavian declared himself Caesar Augustus and set to putting his empire in order. This was bad news for Herod, who owed his kingdom to Antony.

Before Augustus could return to Rome, Herod rushed to meet him at Rhodes, and in a quintessential display of his political savvy, he threw himself on Augustus's mercy. Augustus knew Herod had been close to Antony, and rather than denying it, Herod embraced his fierce loyalty as his best quality. He offered that loyalty to Augustus.

Augustus was impressed by Herod's cunning and audacity, and confirmed his kingship. Because Judea was one of Rome's easternmost provinces, Augustus depended on Herod to keep Judea stable and quiet. The worst thing Herod could be was incompetent. Actually, incompetent was the second-worst thing; the worst would be treasonous. Augustus had offered Herod a second chance, and Herod knew he would not get a third. He spent the rest of his life loudly affirming his loyalty to Augustus.⁹

If Jesus was born around 6 BCE, as most scholars think, Herod was nearly seventy years old when the magi arrived. Their arrival threatened the fragile peace Herod had maintained through sheer force of will. He was not going to surrender that peace or his throne without a fight.

THE GIFT OF THE MAGI

The Parthian envoy sought to put a king friendly to their interests on the throne in Jerusalem. Parthia had done this before: Herod won his kingdom from Aristobulus II, who was put on the throne by the brother to Parthian King Arsaces XXII, who ruled at the time of Jesus' birth. Herod's victory had been part of a larger conflict between Parthia and Rome, with Mark Antony leading Rome's armies in support of Herod.

Whether Augustus had spies in Jerusalem or not, Herod was certain he did. He was certain Rome would know of the magi's visit. At minimum, Augustus would think Herod was collaborating with Rome's enemies, and Herod would be dethroned and executed as a traitor. It was also possible that war could erupt between Rome and Parthia. That war would be waged over Israel, which was caught between the two powers as before.

How could Herod respond? He positioned himself as a potential ally of the Parthians, discerned from his scribes and priests

where the Messiah was said to have been born, then sent the magi on their way with a promise to return with a full report. When they failed to return, Herod “was infuriated” (Matthew 2:16). He surely wondered how long the news would take to reach Rome and how Augustus could possibly view the unfolding of events as anything but betrayal and collusion with the enemy. Herod’s last chance was to act decisively and publicly by sending a message that he was Rome’s man to the end.

The population of Bethlehem at the time of Jesus’ birth was around three hundred, which means the total number of male children two years old or younger would have been six or seven.¹⁰ Seven children were weighed against Herod’s own security. The lives of seven children were weighed against the life of a nation. For Herod, this was no choice. He had watched his father, brother, and friends die. He had executed his beloved wife and three of his own children for plotting against him. What were seven nameless boys he would never know?

Like many of Israel’s kings before him, Herod looked to other gods than Yahweh for both personal and national security. Herod’s allegiance to Rome was strong. His fear of Rome turned him into a monster; idolatry always has that effect.

Herod lived in difficult days and felt as though he was in an impossible situation. He’d spent his whole life negotiating among Rome, the Jewish people, Parthia, other neighboring countries, his family, his ambitions, and more. But in the end, the way he chose to negotiate left him the one true villain of the Christmas story: the king of the Jews who was so far from God that he not only missed the birth of the Messiah, he also tried to murder him.

Like Herod, we don’t live in a world of easy choices. We find ourselves caught between impossible commitments. In a world that’s all shades of gray, every choice feels like a compromise.

So how can we be sure we're not following in Herod's footsteps? In a world that's all shades of gray, how do we choose between bad and worse?

SLIPPING THROUGH THE CRACKS

Even with this window into Herod's life, we struggle to imagine how he could order the deaths of children. But as a nation, we also trade the lives of children for security. In Pakistan alone, by 2014, the drone program pioneered by President Barack Obama killed an estimated 142 *children* while in pursuit of twenty-four suspected terrorists. Only six of those men were killed in those drone strikes.¹¹ And that's just in Pakistan and just until 2014. We are quick to vilify Herod for ordering the deaths of seven boys in Bethlehem, but most Americans give no thought to the US drone program that has been killing children and calling it collateral damage for the better part of a decade. We praise our drones as the next level of warfare, as sensible, and as in the best interests of national security. When we weigh the lives of faceless children living halfway around the world against our own peace of mind, and we choose to feel safe, we are most certainly following in Herod's footsteps, not God's.

A deeper problem is that the vast majority of us are only vaguely aware that the United States and her allies wage drone warfare. We have no idea of the price we pay for our sense of security (and it is only a sense, given that drone warfare has not demonstrably reduced the threat of terror in the countries where it has been utilized). Pakistan may as well be a latter-day Bethlehem, ignored and overlooked as a meaningless backwater country. And while her children die by the dozens, our ears are deaf to the laments of their mothers, much as Herod refused to hear as Rachel wept over her children (to paraphrase Matthew 2:18).

Like Herod, we have more urgent, more immediate concerns than faceless strangers half a world away. Unlike Herod, our struggles are much more ordinary. We're not torn between Rome and Parthia. We negotiate commitments to work, family, faith, and self-care. How do we take enough vacation? Exactly how many activities can our kids participate in before we go insane? Churches don't help the situation, filling calendars with activities, Bible studies, Sunday schools, small groups, and worship gatherings. Between sports leagues, ever-abundant school activities, and a little homework squeezed between the cracks, families with children feel stretched thinner and thinner—especially single parents, who face a workload that has increased dramatically.¹² The outlook isn't much better for those without kids. Gone are the days of the forty-hour workweek. Adults employed full-time work an average of forty-seven hours per week, with almost four in ten workers logging more than fifty hours weekly.¹³

Our culture's solution is *balance*. As Herod sought to balance the demands of Rome and his Jewish subjects, so we seek a healthy work-life balance. How do we balance family and friends? How do we balance faith and the rest of our lives? We feel like jugglers tossing ball after ball into the air, working desperately to keep them all moving. It's no surprise that in our increasingly post-Christian culture, church attendance is one of the first balls many choose to drop.¹⁴

Thinking like this demonstrates that we've commodified the life God has invited us into. We've reduced the resurrecting power of the Holy Spirit to an object, a component. Our religion sits on the shelf next to weekends on the lake and kids' activities and sleeping in one day a week and everything else that competes for our time. No wonder this shallow, privatized religion has nothing to say to

bereft mothers across the globe. No wonder our dull, lifeless worship gatherings so often lose out to the life that is waiting everywhere else.

Reducing God to a commodity is idolatry. Balance can't be the answer to idolatry. As long as we're trying to balance God with anything, we've reduced the Creator of the universe to an object. When we concern ourselves with keeping everyone happy and in balance, the most vulnerable slip through the cracks. When we're focused on everything, the least get overlooked. Balance can't be the answer.

Fortunately Jesus doesn't offer us balance. Rather he offers us an entirely new way to see our lives. In John 12, Jesus reflects on his death with a paradox: "Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (John 12:25).

Our English translations make Jesus' words more confounding by translating two different Greek words as "life." The first two references to life are the Greek word *psyche*, which is often translated "self." It's where we get the word *psychology*. The last word, the "eternal life," is *zoe*. Think of *psyche* as all the stuff that makes up our lives: our identity, our goals, our ambitions, our struggles and failures and successes, our possessions, our families, etc. Think of *zoe* as the essence of life, the state of being *alive*.

Too often we treat religion as *psyche*. God is one more thing among a bunch of other things we have to shuffle and arrange to make sense of ourselves. But God is the very ground of our existence. God is the creator and sustainer, the source of *zoe*. When we reduce *zoe* to *psyche*, we are left aimless with no one and nothing to order our way, no means to make sense of our world.

Author and pastor Shane Higgs asks us to imagine *zoe* as a one and all the stuff that makes up our *psyche* as zeros:

The value of zero and one is determined entirely by their sequence. If you put a zero in front of a one, it does not change the value of the one. If you put three zeros before a one, it does not change the value of the one. You could put a million zeros in front of the one and it does not change the value of the one. The value of the one will stay a one. Likewise, the value of the zero will remain zero in all these instances. However, if you place the one in front of the zero, suddenly you have ten, add three zeros after the one and it's a thousand. As long as the one is placed first, every zero you add increases the value of the one and the zero. Get the sequence right and the value of both is transformed in powerful ways.¹⁵

The stuff that makes up our lives is not worthless. God cares very much about our jobs and our families and our dreams and our hurts and everything else that comprises our psyche. But they are not what gives our lives meaning. The one—the *zoe*—God is the ground of our lives. When we try to put anything else in God's place as the origin and source of our lives, we devalue everything.

Our psyche is not our *zoe*. The stuff of our lives is not life itself. To forget that—to place anything in God's place—is idolatry, and God promises it leads to death. When we allow God to order our lives, we cannot help but notice the most vulnerable. We notice them because they matter to the one ordering our lives.

GONE BABY GONE (TO MEXICO)

While I was a pastor to young adults, I met Jenn Holden. She and her friend Sarah were college students who frequented the Bridge Café while I worked there. They became fixtures of the café, and we spent many nights having long conversations about life, faith, and the world.

During one of these conversations *Gone Baby Gone* came up, and Jenn and Sarah expressed interest in watching the movie. Always excited to introduce people to media I love, I arranged a watch party, and on the weekend a small crowd of us gathered to watch the movie. As the film ended, Jenn's sobs filled the room. She was devastated and left quickly to be alone with her thoughts.

A couple of days later, we sat down to discuss her reaction to the film. She spoke passionately and at length of her love for abused children, her anger at the parents and systems that fail to protect them, and her own feeling of inadequacy in the face of such terrible evils.

I listened for a long time and then challenged her to consider that her passion may in fact be a sign of God's calling on her life. Over the next three years, Jenn continued to grow in her faith and education. When she graduated, she took an internship in Monterrey, Mexico, with Back2Back Ministries, an organization that supports orphanages and works to provide educational opportunities for orphans as they age out of the system. To no one's surprise, Jenn stayed on full time after her internship, living in Monterrey for several years. She still works for Back2Back today.

Jenn is an example of what it looks like when our zoe orders our psyche. She is an example of what it looks like to attend to the most vulnerable. When facing impossible odds, she chooses to be present. She can't fix the problems of every orphan in the world—none of us can. But she heard the voice of God calling her to come and *be*. To live with the children who broke her heart. To let the love that flowed out of her brokenness become a fountain of living water in a dry, loveless desert.

The crisis of orphan care in our world is an impossible problem. None of us can solve this worldwide epidemic. But like Jenn Holden in Monterrey, we can be present. We can refuse to ignore

the most vulnerable among us. Faithful presence, not balance, is the answer. Whether we're in a cubicle or a coffee shop or cheering on the sidelines at a Little League game, or even in a church pew, God calls us to notice and be present with the most vulnerable.

How might the Christmas story look different if Herod had trusted God rather than Rome? Might our nativity scenes include a grizzled old king kneeling next to those magicians? In the most detailed carvings, perhaps we could make out the tension on his face—the fear of Rome's power battling his fledgling hope in Yahweh's promised Messiah? His future is uncertain, but his present is decided. He has come to a manger in a poor backwater town to meet a family of traveling peasants. He is surrounded by the stench of animals and shepherds. And here he encounters the very God of the universe, who makes sense of all his anxiety and uncertainty. How beautiful would that nativity scene have been?

Faithful presence is what God asks of us in impossible situations. When we find life in God, when we put the source of zoe first and allow God to order our psyche, God transforms us into fountains of life. In a world of difficult choices, God does not demand that we have all the right answers. Rather we follow the example of Jesus by wading into the midst of the mess and waiting for God. We face our neighbors with love and joy and peace. We trust the Spirit to create in us patience, kindness, and generosity. We practice faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. God's life flows through us into the world around us. To do otherwise puts us on the wrong side of the Christmas story.

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