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“The Rest of the (Christmas) Story”

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Matthew’s gospel records one of the most disturbing stories in the Bible, one that many Christians would gladly skip over during the Christmas season. While nativity sets across the country celebrate the arrival of the wise men to praise the newborn baby Jesus and shower gifts upon him (the pretense upon which this “gift giving” season is based), few will pause to consider the mass murder that accompanied their departure.

According to Matthew, the wise men were warned in dream to avoid returning to King Herod with a report about the location of the Baby Jesus. “When Herod saw he had been tricked by the wise men,” the Gospel continues, “he was infuriated and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old and under.”

This is a grim and horrifying story, and it is understandable that most Christians would prefer to pass over it lightly as they celebrate Christmas. While the central message of their faith may be that Christ died for our sakes, in this passage it seems instead that the children of Bethlehem are being made to die for Christ’s sake. It is an incongruous and gruesome passage, which grates against the pageantry and sentiment that we have constructed around this holiday.

By downplaying or ignoring it, we make it easier to enjoy Christmas as a spectacle of consumption, but only at the cost of romanticizing an event that is has to do not only with birth, but also with death. It is not only about abundance, but also poverty, not only security, but also flight. It is, in short, about God experiencing every dimension of the human condition, its sorrow as well as its joy, in Jesus Christ.

This is not a version of Christmas that we hear much about, chiefly I suspect because it is not a version likely to sell many greeting cards. But it’s not as if Herod’s
ghost is not still with us today. In Sudan or Baghdad, or even to this day in Bethlehem, the innocent still suffer for the sake of policies and ideologies that they have not chosen.

Perhaps it’s the contrarian in me that brings up the slaughter of the innocents while the rest of the country is trying to enjoy the lights and carols of the holiday season. Yet, this passage expresses a profound and unsettling idea, one worth considering between glasses of eggnog: Just where is God on Christmas? Where might we expect to find a God born in a barn to a family of refugees? This then raises another unsettling question: Where should the followers of this God be?

It is not an accident that the same Gospel that tells of Herod’s massacre also reminds us that the messiah will be called Emmanuel, “God with us.” Matthew’s Gospel reminds us that God is with us in the midst of our worst as well as our best times. It is not only in the bright mornings of blessing and good fortune that we can feel the presence of God, but also in the dark nights of our greatest sorrow.

To Sam Harris, whose book *The End of Faith* is an unrelenting attack on the belief in God, human suffering is Exhibit A in the case against God. Echoing the classic arguments for atheism, Harris asks how a good God could allow such evil to exist. And for many, it is a compelling rebuttal to the belief in a loving God. When such suffering accompanies even the birth of the one that Christians call the messiah, how can we bring ourselves to believe?

Yet, to those of us who do believe, this is the wrong question. The right question is this: Is God with us in our suffering? And the answer that faith gives to this question is yes, God is with us in our suffering, and on our side in our struggles.
To know this may be cold comfort, for it leaves unanswered a host of important and pressing questions. But at the very least it means that our suffering is not meaningless. It does not answer the question of why bad things happen to good people, but it tells us that come what may, we are not alone.

No, this Christmas story may not sell many greeting cards, but for those who believe that in Jesus Christ God came among us, flesh, bone, blood and sinew, it remains Good News.

We can continue to have the lights and carols of Christmas, for it is a joyous season, as birth is a joyous event. As I look forward to Christmas day, I anticipate watching my wife and children open their presents and I am grateful to be able to celebrate and share my many blessings with them. This is Christmas. But Christmas is Herod too, and his ghost has not ceased haunting our too troubled world. Lest we forget, he is Christmas too.