

CHRISTMAST 2
ZION EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH
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THE TROUBLE WE HAVE WITH GOD (Matthew 2:1-12)

Grace, mercy, and peace are yours from God our Father and Christ Jesus, our Savior. Amen.

It's undeniable that we find ourselves in tumultuous times. The calendar shift six days ago did not magically dispel the challenges that lingered from the bumpy ride of 2023. The war in Ukraine and Israel-Hamas thing, still ongoing, right? Cancer, Alzheimer's, arthritis, migraines – they're still putting people through the wringer. Marriages hitting the rocks, workplace dramas, and even with Roe v. Wade flipped on its head a while back, women are still heading to clinics to do horrible things to their children. Plus, on a personal level, we've all got our own bag of troubles and sorrows to lug around. Life, huh?

Now, if we take a stroll back through history, we'd realize that Jesus didn't exactly choose a time when life was a walk in the park either. His times were turbulent, too. Then, again, it would have been difficult to pick a 33 year span of time in the four millennia prior to His birth that wasn't filled with conflict and turmoil. So, too, the era after His ascension wasn't a serene picnic either. The Dark Ages, the middle ages, and the post Reformation were all filled with their own versions of our modern chaos. It seems to be a recurring theme. I challenge you to find an era post-Adam and Eve that wasn't troubled.

Pondering this harsh reality, one might wonder: Didn't Jesus enter the scene to sort out these troubles? Wasn't the plan to establish peace and goodwill on Earth? He has all power in

heaven and on earth, right? So, why are the troubles persisting, and let's be honest, seem to be intensifying? What gives? Are we missing something in the grand scheme of divine intervention? All of this leads us to the issue that we will consider and hopefully, on the basis of Holy Scripture, resolve in our hearts and minds today, which is **“The Trouble We Have with God.”** The portion of God’s Word we consider today is Matthew 2:1-12:

(ESV) Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, (2) saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." (3) When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; (4) and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. (5) They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: (6) "'And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.'" (7) Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. (8) And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him." (9) After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. (10) When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. (11) And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. (12) And being warned in a dream not

to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

We've heard this account more times than we can remember. It's a bitter account that, unless we've gone stone cold inside, breaks our hearts each time we hear it. Yet, as often as we've pondered the human cruelty contained in these words, there's this one bit that doesn't get much attention – we tend to just skip right over it. It's that cryptic verse three, where it says Herod was troubled **and all Jerusalem with him**. In Greek, the word for "troubled" paints a wild picture. It's like shaking up a snow globe. Chaos, disorder, and a bunch of anxiety about where each piece is going to end up. It's hectic, right? It's like life giving us a good ol' shake, and we're just waiting to see where the pieces fall. That's all included in the original language.

Now, Herod, being an extremely narcissistic fellow, was uneasy and irritated. This band of astronomers drops in and starts talking and asking about a new king that has recently been born. Herod is one of the most paranoid historical figures we know of – and not entirely without cause, because, let's face it, he was king over this little Roman province known as Judea. It was a place filled with connivers and false messiahs who were always stirring people up to rebellion. Throw that in with a man whose natural inclination is to suspect anyone of any treachery and you have the makings of an intense power struggle. So, yeah, Herod was troubled!

But why the entire city of Jerusalem? Herod wasn't even a proper Jew; he was more like a political convert, with no genetic connection to king David. If anything, you'd think the Jews would throw a party at the prospect of someone else taking over.

Here's the kicker – Herod was not just power-hungry; he was downright unpredictable. One day, he's all about building temples to get on the people's good side, the next, he's offing priests based on mere suspicion. Judea must have dreamt of the day he'd be replaced. Trouble is, they knew he wouldn't exit the scene without a dramatic showdown. So, when news hit that this new king was born, and Herod got twitchy, Jerusalem got scared – understandably so. While none of them could have predicted precisely how Herod would react, they knew from experience that things would get ugly – not bad hair day with pimple on the nose ugly, but human blood in the streets ugly.

Here's the thing, though: while the people of Jerusalem couldn't predict precisely how Herod would react, the prophet Micah, hundreds of years prior, predicted exactly how Herod was going to react. And the reality is that Micah didn't actually predict it. God told Micah what was going to happen. Rachel – that is the mother of Benjamin, whose descendants occupied the area around Bethlehem – would weep for her children and would not be comforted because they are no more – cut down and murdered in infancy.

And now we're left wondering: What happened to that "peace on earth" thing the angels were singing about – two years ago from their perspective, but just a week from ours? Taking it a step further, if God knew in advance, as we know He did through Micah, why not pull the plug on the whole thing? And Jesus, the only-begotten Son of God, second person of the trinity – why not perform some miracle to foil Herod's nasty plan? This is the trouble we have with God – the whole human race, I mean. One day, He's sitting there letting wise men worship him, but in the middle of the night, He's off to Egypt.

Behind Him is all the chaos and heartache that the world can muster.

Yet, there's another layer to the Bethlehem massacre. We don't know for certain whose children these were, but it's possible that some of them were the young ones of devout believers in God. Have you ever thought that maybe, just maybe, that one or two of them could have been the newborn children of one of those shepherds who had gone to Bethlehem in the middle of the night. Why should they have to suffer this horrible pain in their hearts and souls? Oh, we could, as I've heard some suggest, satiate our curious minds by speculating that perhaps one or two of those babes may have grown up to commit atrocities surpassing even Herod's madness, but that mere speculation does not soften the blow of the gruesome episode that has come to be known as the Massacre of the Innocents. So, the trouble we have with God deepens – He doesn't just stand in the way of violence and evil for his followers; He lets it rain on the just and the unjust, too.

But wait, there's more. The star that guided those wise men, a celestial GPS of sorts, was no ordinary phenomenon. It was a divine setup, a cosmic navigation system orchestrated by God himself to lead them straight to Jesus, with a stop at Herod's on the way. Consider the irony – God knew Herod was plotting away, allowed the wise men to worship him in the midst of brewing trouble, didn't shield his followers from Herod's wrath, and to top it off, He's the One who positioned the star that puts one of the worst episodes of human history in motion.

Wrap your minds around this – it's just one tragic event. It's a snippet in the grand tapestry of human history, all under the watchful gaze of the God, of whom Scripture testifies "so loved the world" and gifted us His only Son, born the King of the Jews.

Yet, the trouble we have with God persists; He often seems less like a Father and more like an enigmatic and unreliable figure at best, especially from the vantage point of us mere mortals.

But then, that's just it – human perspective is nothing more than a foggy lens, scratched and blurred by the abrasiveness of sin at work in us. We're not wise enough, not knowledgeable enough, and truth be told, especially not good enough to lay down the grand plan for life. In our arrogance, we parade around thinking we've got it figured out. The trouble we have with God, if we distill it down to its purest form, is that He doesn't handle our sin and its consequences in the way we would prefer. Part of the problem is that we tend to think that it's the world that is messing with our happiness, and since God is the one controlling the world, so is He. We fail to take into account that we – each one of us – make up the world. That means that the trouble we have with God originates in us and not in Him. It's sin corrupting the very core of our being, leaving us all little paranoid tyrants, and sometimes great big paranoid tyrants, toward others. We don't see it that way because, well, once again, sin has blurred our vision.

The Bible reveals God's grand, gracious will is not merely to whisk away these temporal consequences of our sin, but to deal with the actual sin itself. God's plan isn't to allow us to live as comfortably as we possibly can while sin continues to rot away in our souls. His plan is to reunite us with Himself in righteousness, so that the cause of our troubles is taken away.

In this world broken by sin, life's a tough gig. Disappointments, struggles, tragedy – it's like a perpetual ping-pong match, with each of us feeling like the ping-pong ball. And, let's be honest, sometimes Jesus throws us a curveball just when we begin relying on a simple fastball. So, while we were happy and

content to flash a smile at the Baby in the manger, there's an undeniable groan at the harsh reality of sin ushering suffering into the world. It's a testament to the brokenness within each of us, a clear sign of our fractured relationship with the Almighty.

But to get right to the heart of the matter, we have to consider one final question: Why would a God, who is the very definition of love, send His Son into this tumultuous world? I mean, would you do that to your child? For God, it was all about reconciling the world to Himself. Jesus accomplished that very goal when, having endured all the heartache and violence that the world had to throw at Him, gave up His life on the cross.

Jesus didn't show up just to run away when death and heartache came. Rather, He took on death in a much more intense and brutal way. It wasn't Herod, the Sanhedrin, or Pilate and his soldiers who offed Jesus. It was actually His own Father, as another prophet predicted centuries earlier, as Isaiah wrote of God the Father in relationship to the suffering and death of Jesus, "He has put Him to grief." God, the Father, went all in by laying our sins on Jesus, and in doing so, He accomplished the reconciliation of the world to Himself. Our sins don't count against us anymore, and death itself, that cruel tyrant, got a serious beatdown.

It was Herod, that wicked and godless ruler, that did the unspeakable. He murdered those innocent babies and, with a twisted narrative, pinned the blame on Jesus for being a newborn king. Don't fall into that trap. Here we are, surrounded and troubled by sin in the world, grappling with our own issues, and often pointing fingers at God like He's the root of all our problems.

The reality is that the trouble we have with God is all reconciled in the revelation of His grace toward us in Christ. When we do not take His grace and His Son's cross into account all we can see is trouble. The real trouble, though, isn't with God; it's within us, a gnawing turmoil that would eternally devour us. But when our hearts are focused on the Lord Jesus Christ, we see that our God has rescued us from a far more diabolical tyrant and a far greater misery than what we see and experience on earth. He has rescued us from sin, death, and hell. That's the King the wise men came to worship. That's the King we are blessed to have rule our hearts and our lives by His grace. AMEN!