It seems outrageous to thank God for the existence of this story. It seems outrageous that this tale of ancient atrocity should be bound up with our celebrations of the birth of Jesus, with our happiest, most family-oriented time of the year. Yet, here it is and, for reasons that I hope will become clear, perhaps it's not so outrageous after all. There are, after all, some truths in this story that speak to us across the centuries, truths about the 21st century as well as the First. And there are promises hidden, encrypted in this story for us to find – promises that even in the midst of death we can find life, promises that the gracious will of God for all of creation will prevail in the face of human and systemic evil.

Perhaps I should begin, as I so often do, with some consideration of how Matthew's first audience of Jewish Christians might have heard this story. Undoubtedly, they would understand that Matthew, as he did throughout his book, was using prophecies and stories from the Old Testament to show that Jesus was truly the Messiah for whom they had been waiting. From the very beginning of his re-telling of the Jesus saga, Matthew has pointed his audience toward this conclusion, placing Jesus directly in the lineage of King David, establishing his royal *bona fides*. With this story, he shows Jesus as the new fulfillment of some of the Children of Israel's oldest and holiest stories, as well as some of their more troubled post-Davidic history.

The story here begins with a very familiar element: a man named Joseph, who has a dream. Like his forefather, Jacob's son, this Joseph ends up in Egypt as a result of his dream but under his own power rather than carried there. In both cases, however, the journey is the result of jealous malice. Like the first Joseph's descendants, this new Joseph and the baby he fosters are in danger of an edict of infanticide from an evil ruler. But just as Moses, the Lawgiver, was spared from the slaughter of the Hebrew babies, so Jesus, the one who brings fulfillment of the Law, is spared from the massacre in Bethlehem. Matthew knows that, like the Children of Israel, God will eventually call His Son home out of Egypt. But in the immediate aftermath of Joseph's dream and the flight of the family, there is anguish in Bethlehem to match that of the duel exiles of Rachel's children, the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh and, later, Benjamin, by the Assyrians and then the Babylonians. It was Jeremiah who first used the image of Rachel weeping to express the sorrow of exile at a time when it seemed all hope was lost for Yahweh's people. There are other resonances in the connection with Jeremiah to which I will return later.

It's worth noting, I think, that as extreme and unlikely as this story might seem to us, those Jewish Christians first hearing Matthew's account would have understood it as just a sad fact in the world in which they lived. They would not have been tempted to understand it as hyperbole in the service of creating a myth about the Savior. They would have known full well that Herod the Great was capable of exactly such actions as Matthew describes. There is no evidence outside Matthew's Gospel for the Slaughter of the Innocents, but that is hardly surprising. The best archaeological reconstructions make Bethlehem a town of less than 1,000 residents at the time of Christ; there would not have been more than 20 or so male children under 2 – hardly an act worth noting in Herod's heinous career. The historian Josephus documents far more serious massacres ordered by Herod, who did not hesitate to have his own sons or wives executed if he felt they threatened him. In his book, The Birth of the Messiah, Raymond Brown relates an infamous story of Herod: "To ensure mourning at his funeral, Herod wanted his soldiers instructed to kill notable political prisoners upon the news of his death. His goal was expressed thus: 'So shall all Judea and every household weep for me, whether they wish it or not.'"

Nor should we be surprised at the ruthlessness of a king who would stoop to killing children to secure his throne. Certainly, we would like to think that such cruelty is in the past for humankind, relegated to the realm of Shakespearean villains like Richard III. Unfortunately, this sort of hideous crime is documented by our news media up to the moment. As I wrote this, reports came of the execution of Saddam Hussein for his "out-Heroding" of Herod, giving orders to wipe out the men and boys of a village where an attempt on his own life was planned. Earlier in the week, I read of renewed attempts at genocide in Darfur by militias supported by the Sudanese government, of chaos and death in Somalia as the government of Ethiopia chose to invade in support of their favored faction against an Islamist takeover, of bloody political battles in Bangladesh and assassinations in Russia, and, of course, of the continued deaths in Iraq. In all of these places, civilians — women and children — are being victimized by those who see violence as a legitimate tool of political aspiration.

And then there is the sad story of Bethlehem itself. Most of us probably only think of Bethlehem as the "little town" of the carol, stuck forever in a sort of First Century twilight. According to a recent poll, only 15% of Americans realize that Bethlehem is a Palestinian city with a mixed Christian-Muslim community, lying in the occupied West Bank. For centuries, Bethlehem was home to the descendents of Christ's earliest followers. Through the devastation of Jerusalem by Rome, through the rise of Islam and the Crusades, through two World Wars, the Christians of Bethlehem survived and even flourished. Indeed, according to Atallah Mansour, a noted Israeli scholar who is both Palestinian by birth and Catholic, "Bethlehem, up to 15 years ago, had a majority of Christian people. People who left the country 100 years ago and 50 years ago to Chile and Brazil, they were coming back and there was a feeling that things were improving." But that was before the violence of the *Intifada* and the retaliatory building of walls and barricades that have both cut Bethlehem off from Jerusalem and divided the city itself. Bethlehem's Christian inhabitants have dwindled from more than 85% of the city's total population in 1948 to 12% of its 60,000 inhabitants in 2006. The economy, which was thriving just a few years ago to the extent that huge tourist hotels were being planned, is now in shambles. A decade ago, 90,000 pilgrims would annually fill Nativity Square across from the Church of the Nativity at Christmas time. Last year, only 3,000 came. Once again, the children of Bethlehem are threatened by the powers of violence – not with sudden death, but with poverty and isolation or the prospect, like Jesus and his parents, of becoming refugees.

"Jesus was a refugee. That's all I can think about this Christmas." That's how the young Texas Baptist scholar, Laura Seay begins her contemplation of this story. Ms. Seay goes on to point out the seeming ubiquity of refugees this Christmas season: the humanitarian organization Refugees International estimates that there are currently nearly 12 million refugees and asylum seekers worldwide, those who have crossed international borders fleeing from war or persecution, many with just the clothes on their backs, no money, no food, no jobs. That staggering figure does not include some 23.6 million "IDPs," "internally displaced persons," whose circumstances are just as dire but who are still somewhere in their country of origin, though far from home. Indeed, the terrifying situation of Joseph, Mary and the baby Jesus is echoed over and over again in the world today.

One of the questions that we must ask ourselves as we consider this very un-Christmas-y Christmas story is whether we, too, are refugees and mourners or whether we are in some way complicit with Herod. How do our lifestyles, lavish by the standards of most of the world, contribute to the worldwide thirst for oil, which has so skewed political development in the Middle East and, in many ways, further destabilized that historically tumultuous region? How has our fear and craving for national security helped to create more violence, more death, more refugees? Has our self-satisfied complacency resulted in administration after administration that has allowed U.S. agencies to play fast and loose with the rules of international diplomacy, funding and arming petty dictators in an effort to buy friends where we would have been better off trying to help raise populations from poverty? We must always remember that we are the Body of Christ, the representatives of that tiny refugee on today's earth, and that we must consider the impact of our actions on our neighbors. Our neighbors, thanks to the globalization of the world's economy and information systems, are not only the vulnerable ones here in Lynnwood or Puget Sound or Washington, but those in Darfur, or Chile, or Bethlehem. It is important for us to see as we read this story that it does not take the commission of acts of violence to stand in solidarity with Herod. All it takes is that we jealously guard our prerogatives without consideration for the impact on others.

But if it is true that some part of us stands with Herod in this story, then it is also true that at least a part of our hearts are aligned with Rachel, who weeps inconsolably for her children, because they are not. All of us have known sorrow, though only a few have had to face that darkest of tragedies, the loss of a child. "A mother weeping for her lost children is as bad as it gets in this life," is the word from Wendy Murray Zoba in her reflection on the Flight to Egypt. My own parents lost two infant children prior to my birth and, although she never shared with me about the aftermath, I discovered after her own untimely death that my mother had been driven to thoughts of suicide and a brief hospitalization by her grief. I am grateful to have not experienced that most profound of losses but all of us here have grieved the passing of loved ones that came far too soon, or with too much pain, or without enough notice, or with too much. And all of us have faced other griefs as well, the deaths of the children of our imaginations and aspirations. All of us have known disappointment, failure, rejection. Is there one of us here, I wonder, who has not at some point in their lives wanted to sit on a rock in the desert and wail over "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune… the heartache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to… the whips and scorns of time, The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely, The pangs of despised love, the law's delay, The insolence of office and the spurns That patient merit of the unworthy takes"? No, it's not necessary to be the wife of the Patriarch nor the Prince of Denmark to feel the profound grief that life inevitably brings our way.

But this, oddly enough, brings me to the promise hidden away in this dreadful story. I think Matthew was conveying something else to his readers when he chose the image of the inconsolable Rachel from Jeremiah to depict the grief in Bethlehem that awful day. As I mentioned earlier, Jeremiah originally used the image to reflect on his own experience of the exile of Judah and the memory of the previous exile of Israel. But the image is contained in a broader context in chapters 30 and 31 of that prophet's book – a promise of restoration and of hope. "Thus says the LORD: Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears; for there is a reward for your work, says the LORD: they shall come back from the land of the enemy; there is hope for your future, says the LORD: your children shall come back to their own country… The

days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt… But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more."

It is a promise that the exiled ones will return, that the refugees will return. Surely, Matthew meant for us to key into that promise amid the carnage and more. Not only will Jesus return from Egypt but he will come bearing the Good News, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." Jesus proclaimed the gracious will of God for all people again and again: "Do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' Your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened." "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Ultimately, Matthew's terrible story points to hope. The Kingdom of God has been inaugurated in the very midst of the troubled and violent kingdom of this world. The baby Jesus was saved to embody the word of hope and to give his life for our hope. And the promise goes further still. Just as Herod failed to kill the infant king, just as Pilate and Caiaphas and the rest failed to destroy Jesus and his message, just as death failed to bind him on Easter, so shall all violence, death and evil fail in the end. Herod did not triumph; Nero did not triumph. Hitler and Stalin and Idi Amin, Saddam Hussein and Osama Bin Ladin and Augusto Pinochet, none of those who would practice genocide and torture and death, ultimately triumph. The final triumph belongs to our God and to God's Christ. In the Episcopal Church, the lectionary links Matthew's story and Jeremiah's prophecy with another prophecy, that found near the end of the Revelation of John: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." Then he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children."

No matter what the world deals us, God is ultimately the victor and we, who stand with God, are victors as well as long as we remember that we are God's children with all that entails. I was

recently introduced to a wonderful poem on the hope contained in this wrenching story, a poem by Charles Péguy called "The Mystery of the Holy Innocents." Here is an excerpt:

I am, God says, Master of the Three Virtues.
Faith is a loyal wife.
Charity is a fervent mother.
But hope is a very little girl.

I am, God says, the Master of the Virtues.

It is Faith who holds fast through century upon century.

It is Charity who gives herself through centuries of centuries.

But it is my little hope
Who gets up every morning.
Says good-day to us . . .
I am, God says, the Lord of the Virtues.

It is Faith who resists through century upon century.
It is Charity who yields through century upon century.
But it is my little hope
Who every morning
Says good-day to us . . .

It is my little hope
who goes to sleep every evening
In her child's bed,
after having said a good prayer,
and who wakes every morning and gets up
and says her prayers with new attention . . .

You believe that children know nothing,
And that parents and grown-up people know something.
Well, I tell you it is the contrary
(It is always the contrary).
It is the parents, it is the grown-up people who know nothing.
And it is the children who know
Everything.

For they know first innocence,
Which is everything.

The world is always inside out, God says.
And in the contrary sense.
Happy is he who remains like a child

And who like a child keeps
His first innocence . .

Sometimes, my brothers and sisters, perhaps we are Herod. And sometimes, perhaps we are Rachel. But always, always to God, we are His children and God has promised to hold us safe under Her wings, like a mother hen with her chicks. And isn't that a wonderful bit of Good News in this Christmas story? Thanks be to God.