

Blogging toward Epiphany: A life and death matter

By [Thomas R. Steagald](#)

January 3, 2012

For more commentary on the Epiphany readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.

The Old Testament and gospel readings for Epiphany function as point and counterpoint. Isaiah offers a word of great comfort to those who have been so long in darkness. Impoverished as the hearers have been, honor and fortune are on their way. It's a message of rejoicing: the light that has dawned will make all who see it radiant.

Or not. Herod does not rejoice, of course. He does not find comfort or hope in the magi's report; he doesn't see the star's light. The magi see the light and tell Herod what they think it surely means--an interpretation they presume he knows. He does not.

When Herod learns about this message--with the help of his own "wise men"--he is "troubled," the old Bible says, or "frightened." So frightened and troubled, in fact, that he engages in intrigue, prevarication and--later in the text--even mass infanticide.

In a way, the story of the slaughter of the innocents incarnates Simeon's warning that Jesus is "a sign that will be opposed, so that the inward thoughts of many should be revealed" (for my money, one of the most pregnant verses in all scripture). Most scholars understand the story to be legendary, as it isn't mentioned by Matthew's contemporaries.

Of course, for a king who was not above killing his own wife and sons in his mad quest to preserve power, killing some peasant children would hardly be out of character. It's possible that such an incident, taking place in a somewhat obscure village in the context of a reign such as Herod's, didn't warrant mention in secular texts.

In any case, the story of the Innocents makes a powerful point, one similar to that of another feast day observed just after Christmas, Stephen's martyrdom: the coming of Jesus is a matter of life and death. Mary is but the first to bleed on account of the Messiah's birth. Within the 12 days of Christmas, a child is both welcomed and opposed.

The light of Epiphany both illumines and darkens. The star produces a shadow; it evokes the human worst even as it testifies to the divine best. And so the thick reality at the heart of all doctrine is iterated: there is good news of great joy to all people, wonderful comfort to those who are eager to receive God's gift and reign. But woven into this comfort is a dangerous element that will unite Herod and Pilate and even Caesar--and all those who refuse to receive or yield to this reign of God.