

December 28, Christmas 1A (Matthew 2:13-23)

The incarnation means God enters the world as it stands, not as we wish it to be.

by [Roger Nelson](#) in the [December 2025](#) issue

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At the far south end of Chicago's Michigan Avenue, 116 blocks from the Magnificent Mile, Diane Latiker built a stone memorial. The mother of eight, Diane started to stack bricks on which the names of Chicago children killed by gun violence were scribbled in magic marker. One brick for each child. What started as a handful of bricks from Home Depot became more than 600 stones lining an alley shed. The site became holy. People stopped to pray and remember. Diane didn't know all the children, but she wanted people to remember the slaughter of children.

While the little Lord Jesus was asleep on the hay, children were rousted from their beds, wrenched from their parent's arms, and executed by Herod's henchmen. Somewhere amid the cattle lowing and the angels singing is heard the weeping of parents at the murder of their children.

There's a dark side to the nativity, an unspeakable horror that we don't quickly tell our children or include in the Christmas pageant. It's not easily pondered or proclaimed. It's hard to imagine and hard to accept as part of the mystery of how God came to us in Jesus. Maybe that's why we read this text in the backwash, after the Christmas crowds have gone home.

So, what are we to make of the slaughter of the innocents? Do we position it as a piece of a prophetic puzzle? Do we accept it as part of the reality of existing in this cruel world? Do we just sing louder and drown out the cries of children and parents? Or do we dare look even here for some hint of God in this world?

It seems worth noting that there are no other records of this massacre of children in Bethlehem. It's not mentioned again in the New Testament. And while the historian Josephus reports that Herod ordered the execution of his own wife and sons and decreed that at his own death the leading citizens of Jericho should also be slain so that the nation might mourn appropriately, Josephus says nothing about the killing of baby boys in Bethlehem.

That doesn't mean it didn't happen. Herod could have ordered such a thing, and the slaughter of children from a small village might have gone unrecorded. A common number suggested by historians is that 20 to 30 children would have been killed, not hundreds or thousands. As if a smaller number is better—tell that to the parent who lost a child.

Early in this decade gun violence surpassed car crashes as the leading cause of death for American children. Fifteen years after the school shooting in Sandy Hook, school shootings remain a recurring horror—but they actually account for less than 1 percent of these gun deaths. Accidents account for a small percentage; homicides and suicides are the vast majority. The uniquely American idolatry of gun ownership is costing us our children.

I've been to too many funerals for killed children. I've sat with parents who were so shattered that they couldn't lift their heads to look at the casket. I offered the eulogy for a boy whose name belonged on a brick. Two weeks later his father died of a broken heart—his body couldn't bear the grief. Our text has it that Rachel wouldn't or

couldn't be comforted. The loss, unspeakable. The grief, inconsolable.

And yet, the outlandish claim of the gospels is that God became flesh not in the world of nativity snow globes, shiny happy people, and naive spirituality but in the world where tyrants kill babies and parents can't be consoled. If the incarnation has any meaning at all, then God came into the darkest realities of this world.

Henry James writes, in *Theory of Fiction*:

Life is, in fact, a battle. Evil is insolent and strong; beauty enchanting but rare; goodness very apt to be weak; folly very apt to be defiant; wickedness to carry the day; imbeciles to be in great places; people of sense to be in small; and mankind generally unhappy, but the world as it stands is no illusion, no phantasm, no evil dream of a night; we wake up to it again and for ever and ever; we can neither forget it nor deny it nor dispense with it.

The mystery of Christmas is that Jesus is born into the world as it stands—the world to which we wake again and again. The world of school shootings, terrorist states, rulers who feel threatened, and parents who bury children. The world in which Rachel weeps.

God doesn't rise above, whisk away, or shrug off this world. From cradle to cross God enters in, shares, and bears our pain. Our hope, even in the nativity, is that God in Christ is resurrecting monuments of stone and overthrowing tyrants—and that we are not alone.