

Christmas Day 2011

2 Kings 11:1-22 "The Christmas Murder Plot"

¹ Now when Athaliah the mother of Ahaziah saw that her son was dead, she arose and destroyed all the royal family.² But Jehosheba, the daughter of King Joram, sister of Ahaziah, took Joash the son of Ahaziah and stole him away from among the king's sons who were being put to death, and she put him and his nurse in a bedroom. Thus they hid him from Athaliah, so that he was not put to death.³ And he remained with her six years, hidden in the house of the Lord, while Athaliah reigned over the land.

⁴ But in the seventh year Jehoiada sent and brought the captains of the Carites and of the guards, and had them come to him in the house of the Lord. And he made a covenant with them and put them under oath in the house of the Lord, and he showed them the king's son.⁵ And he commanded them, "This is the thing that you shall do: one third of you, those who come off duty on the Sabbath and guard the king's house⁶ (another third being at the gate Sur and a third at the gate behind the guards) shall guard the palace.⁷ And the two divisions of you, which come on duty in force on the Sabbath and guard the house of the Lord on behalf of the king,⁸ shall surround the king, each with his weapons in his hand. And whoever approaches the ranks is to be put to death. Be with the king when he goes out and when he comes in."

⁹ The captains did according to all that Jehoiada the priest commanded, and they each brought his men who were to go off duty on the Sabbath, with those who were to come on duty on the Sabbath, and came to Jehoiada the priest.¹⁰ And the priest gave to the captains the spears and shields that had been King David's, which were in the house of the Lord.¹¹ And the guards stood, every man with his weapons in his hand, from the south side of the house to the north side of the house, around the altar and the house on behalf of the king.¹² Then he brought out the king's son and put the crown on him and gave him the testimony. And they proclaimed him king and anointed him, and they clapped their hands and said, "Long live the king!"

¹³ When Athaliah heard the noise of the guard and of the people, she went into the house of the Lord to the people.¹⁴ And when she looked, there was the king standing by the pillar, according to the custom, and the captains and the trumpeters beside the king, and all the people of the land rejoicing and blowing trumpets. And Athaliah tore her clothes and cried, "Treason! Treason!"¹⁵ Then Jehoiada the priest commanded the captains who were set over the army, "Bring her out between the ranks, and put to death with the sword anyone who follows her." For the priest said, "Let her not be put to death in the house of the Lord."¹⁶ So they laid hands on her; and she went through the horses' entrance to the king's house, and there she was put to death.

¹⁷ And Jehoiada made a covenant between the Lord and the king and people, that they should be the Lord's people, and also between the king and the people.¹⁸ Then all the people of the land went to *the house of Baal* and tore it down; his altars and his images they broke in pieces, and they killed Mattan the priest of Baal before the altars. And the priest posted watchmen over the house of the Lord.¹⁹ And he took the captains, the Carites, the guards, and all the people of the land, and they brought the king down from the house of the Lord, marching through the gate of the guards to the king's house. And he took his seat on the throne of the kings.²⁰ So all the people of the land rejoiced, and the city was quiet after Athaliah had been put to death with the sword at the king's house.

²¹ Jehoash was seven years old when he began to reign. (ESV)

We have a house on our street that has this sign –it's simply three, large, individual letters – that spell, "JOY." Joy is one of the words of the season, and you know all of the rest. Peace. Light. Gift. Birth. Star. Angels. Child. Rejoice. Emmanuel. We like these.

But there is another set of words that is equally appropriate to the telling of the Christmas story: Conflict. Fight. Murder. Slaughter. Infanticide. Death.

Ever hear those in a Christmas carol? Think you'll *ever* see those words spelled out on someone's lawn? Not likely.

But they should be – at least nestled into some of them. Because the events 2,000 years ago that we call the Christmas story, those historical events make up the penultimate – the next to last – chapter in what you could call a long murder mystery plot.

And this mystery pops to the surface in so many places in the bible that it becomes important to pick up the clues when they occur. This story – the story here in 2nd Kings of the evil Queen Athaliah – shows us three things about Christmas and about Christianity. And I would say that you could extract these three elements of the truth about Christmas every time the murder plot of the bible pops to the surface.

- Christianity (Christmas) is about a Battle
- Christianity (Christmas) is about Peace
- Christianity (Christmas) is about a Certain Hope

The first truth is that Christianity is a battle. That is that Christmas – the coming of the Messiah – solves many of the world's deepest and most significant problems, but it creates other problems. Christmas brings peace, but it also brings conflict and battles.

Let me see if I can just begin to trace this out for you.

The bible's murder plot... is *not* fiction. It starts off at the very dawn of humanity. No sooner are man and woman created than Satan shows up to gain control over human history. And the battle begins. Satan succeeds in having this man and woman follow after him. No sooner is humanity created than they are just a moment away from extinction. But God preserves his plan and rescues humanity from certain death in this fight to the death battle, by putting enmity – "I'm going to put hatred between you, Satan, and the woman, and your seed and her seed, and you will strike his heel, but he will crush your head."

And in that moment the plot was hatched. Satan, over and over again, comes within one person of wiping out the entire rescue plan of God. No sooner do Adam and Eve have children then murder begins among humanity. Cain murders Abel. Still later, the human race again comes down to one, when Noah is saved, and again, the plot was foiled, for the moment.

Still later, Abraham is told that he will be a father of nations. That is the victory, and the end that's in view. Peace, blessing, joy. All of those great Christmas words. But what happens? Abraham gets very old, and there are no children. No seed from the woman... until there is one.

Isaac. Then Isaac becomes the carrier of that promise. But of course Satan turns his sights on him. Over and over the battle continues, with the question hanging over all of this: who will win?

We saw the Christmas story pop up last week when God promises David that through him, God would establish his kingdom. Through his lineage, there would come an eternal kingdom and an eternal king. And immediately Satan again knew where to focus his attention. No sooner is that promise made than one of David's sons kills his brother. Sounds familiar, right? In fact the remaining son, Absalom, tries to kill his father, until Absalom himself is killed.

But the seed continued. It continued because it was hidden in a most unlikely place – the line of David would come through an adulterous relationship with a woman named Bathsheba. But Satan's murder weapons continued to expand. He created confusion, and conflict, and the kingdom itself became divided.

How would God carry out his plan and protect the royal line of David?

By the time we get here, in 2nd Kings 11, the king up in the north, Ahaziah, has died. And his Queen is eager to seize an opportunity, even though she is not of the line of David, to take over the north AND the south by assuming the throne.

And to make sure that no one from David's line threatens her rule, she takes the opportunity to wipe out the entire royal seed. That lust and desire for power is so strong that Athaliah murders her own grandchildren. Seventy are killed – 42 of them her near relatives. But because of a daughter and a priest, one is hidden.

Now it's all terrible. But what it really is, is terribly typical.

Athaliah is just another person who is threatened by this one, little child. The seed.

Many years later, after Jesus was born and it was time to take him to the temple, there was a man there named Simeon who had been diligently waiting for the Messiah. He sings a song – a famous song we call the *Nunc dimittis* – and when he's done and the child has been blessed, he says this to Mary: "Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through *your* own soul *also*...)"¹

One pastor I know said, "What would you do, you mothers, if you presented your child to the church for baptism the way that Jesus was presented for circumcision, and the pastor said to you after he poured the water over your baby, 'Just so you know, I have a word from the Lord here that your child is going to be spoken against, this child will cause all kinds of problems and conflict in the future, wars will come about as a result of this baby, and you won't escape either because a sword will pierce your soul too. Okay, have a nice lunch with your family at the Nassau Inn.'"

But Simeon is stating the obvious when you step back from the whole story of the bible. What Simeon says makes sense because he knows the clues that have been dropped all along in this plot. What Athaliah is doing here in 2nd Kings is far more harrowing than simply murdering her

¹ Luke 2:34–35.

grandchildren (as shocking as that is). Even more significantly, she is setting herself up in opposition to God and the kingdom he has promised.

The way she sees it, if these children die, so do the promises of God.

But that must not happen. And Simeon knows that. Jesus comes not simply to bring peace, joy and light. But there is a battle going on. Jesus also comes to bring a sword. Later on in Matthew, Matthew 10, Jesus himself says

"Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have *not* come to bring peace, but a *sword*. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother... And a person's enemies will be those of his own household." ²

Christmas is the battle enjoined.

Some of you know that I was working as an executive in the network television business when I became a Christian. And I had this enormous peace come over my life. Like nothing I had ever felt or known before. But there was also this incredible tension. I was working on program that, to put it charitably, was sub-Christian. Some might – some socially vocal Christians actually said – that at least one of the shows I worked on could lead folks *into* sin.

So I sought out my brand new pastors. What am I supposed to do? Tim Keller said that when he became a Christian, he read a chapter out of JC Ryle's book *Holiness*. Ryle was a 19c. Anglican – the Bishop of Liverpool – and Tim said that he suggests it for other new Christians, because we think those tremendous feelings of peace that we have when we come to faith should be unaccompanied by anything else, any challenge or struggle. Here is what Ryle says:

There is a vast quantity of religion current in the world which is not true, genuine Christianity. It ... satisfies sleepy consciences; but it is not good money. It is not the authentic reality that called itself Christianity in the beginning.

There are thousands of men and women who go to churches ... every Sunday and call themselves Christians. They make a "profession" of faith in Christ. Their names are in the baptismal register... They are married with a Christian marriage service. They [will be] buried as Christians when they die. But you never see any "fight" about their religion! Of spiritual strife and exertion and conflict and self-denial and watching and warring they know literally nothing at all. ... [I]t certainly is *not* the Christianity of the Bible. It is not the religion which the Lord Jesus founded and His apostles preached... True Christianity is "a fight."

With whom is the Christian soldier meant to fight? Not with other Christians. ... No, indeed! The principal fight of the Christian is with the world, the flesh and the devil. These are his never-dying foes. These are the three chief enemies against whom he must wage war. ... If he had a nature like an angel, and were not a fallen creature, the warfare would not be so essential. But with a corrupt heart, a busy devil and an ensnaring world, he must either "fight" or be lost...

² Matthew 10:34-36

The child of God has two great marks about him... He may be known by his *inward warfare*, as well as by his *inward peace*.³

Now look, not everyone experiences this fight in the same way. Because it all depends on *where* you are with Jesus. If you're not a Christian, and you don't see this, there is a reason. Christians, you know this as you think about your life before faith: The irony of this Christmas conflict is that if you are not a Christian, your life can be filled with *enormous calm*. Some sin actually brings with it a placidness... a calmness, as its defining characteristic. Selfishness, for instance – giving yourself exactly what you desire, all the time (including what we call creature comforts for a reason!) – can bring with it a *tremendous* sense of peace. Or at least that's what it promises.

But when you become a Christian, it's something like leaving your bed on a winter's morning, where you were warm and comfortable, and then stepping out in your pajamas into a blizzard.

On the other hand, there are others of you – maybe your life was, or even is, characterized by chaos – and when you came into faith and a knowledge of Jesus, you were overwhelmed by a sense of peace and tranquility.

But the point is, ultimately you're going to have both, even while one may be stronger than the other. You will have peace and strife. You will have more joy *and* more conflict. You will know more light, *and* see more darkness. Things that never bothered you *before* you were a Christian will *now* profoundly disturb you, and things that *used* to bother you *just don't* anymore. That's how you know you're Christian. Christmas brings war AND peace! Your conscience is given incredible peace – no condemnation! – and yet you are disturbed by a lack of holiness all around you. AND in you. Christianity is a battle.

- **But, this is our second point: Christmas IS peace.**

You see this throughout this chapter, and frankly, we could have gotten away with just reading the first three verses of the chapter and preached just that part of the story – it's a birth narrative – except we would have missed this one rhythmic point that the writer makes over and over.

Jehosheba, sister of the fallen king, and the aunt to this little boy who is David's seed – she, along with Jehoiada, who we learn in v. 9 is the high priest (and by the way, those two get married in 2 Chronicles!) – they hide the child in "the house of the Lord." Over and over again in these verses – (22 times in chapters 11 and 12 combined) we're reminded of "the house of the Lord."

Why? Because the point of Christmas is the gift of God's presence for his people. (repeat).

What is "the house of the Lord?" It's the temple. It's the ark, the mercy seat, the holy of holies. And just as important is that in a place like Jerusalem – this isn't car culture – the temple is just a couple of doors away from the palace. In fact, the passage wants you to see the very close proximity of the house of the Lord, and in v. 18, the house of Baal. When Athaliah is killed, and

³ Ryle, J. (1996). *Holiness: Its nature, hinderances, difficulties and roots* (electronic ed. based on the Evangelical Press reprinting, with new forward, 1995.) (50–52,55). Simpsonville SC: Christian Classics Foundation.

Jehoiada makes or reestablishes the covenant with God, we learn that the people "went to *the house of Baal* and tore it down; his altars and his images they broke in pieces."

Now do you know what that means? When you become a Christian, you are immediately in the presence of God. You're no longer united to what used to rule you. Those things fall to the ground like so many pieces of a broken idol. You are now united to Christ. You carry around with you – the house of the Lord. You have *peace* with God.

Your sins, your past, your failures ... those things don't accuse you anymore. Your conscience doesn't scream accusations any longer. You get a peace that comes to you because Christmas is the end of our struggle to live "up" to the world. Where you always have to prove who you are.

Think about that: why does someone who is "in Christ" ever have to prove that they are "somebody?" They don't. If you have success, it's not about you. It's still good! But it's not about you. Your identity is in Christ. If you fail, it's not about you. It's still hard, but it's not about you. You're identity is in Christ. No longer do you ricochet back and forth between pride and low self-esteem. No longer are you constantly inflated and deflated, where you judge others as not so good and raise yourself above them, and then turn right around and feel like your nothing compared to someone else.

See, you can be right in the midst of the battles of this world – right next to the Devil himself – and have perfect peace because wherever you are – you're in the house of the Lord. It's a balance, an equilibrium, that transcends your circumstances even as it takes those present circumstances seriously.

Let's say you had some money. And it's gone. The Dow drops, and so does your personal wealth. Christianity is not a namby-pamby religion that says, "Money doesn't matter." Or "Money is just this-world stuff. I live and move in another realm that is just so far above this material world." No. A Christian takes seriously that not only did they lose a lot of wealth, but so did their neighbors, and so do the very poor who might not be in the market, but are hired by people who are, and receive help from those who have. The Christians says about that situation. "It's not good, but money was never *my value*. My wealth is not *in* money. I lost treasure here, but my real treasure is in things above, and that's safe. So, what do I do now?" The same with your health, your grades, your job. Your real health is safe. Your real job as a child of the king is safe, and it never goes away.

You can have, like little Joash, peace in the middle of difficult circumstances. The battle can't touch you deep down where the peace really is. The heart. Because instead of anxiety, there is trust. And where there was guilt, there is freedom.

In fact, this peace is not only permanent, because its peace with God, but it is a peace that is *dual* purpose. Because it is a peace that is *for* the battle.

So look. The church is an unusual institution, isn't it? Look around. I mean how many of these people would you want to have coffee with? 5? 10? Maybe 15?

Guess what? These are your brothers and sisters in Christ. Some are older than you, and some are younger than you. Some are from right here in NJ, and some are from across the world. Some vote like you, and maybe some don't vote at all.

But when you're a Christian you have to move *towards* these people. That can be a battle. Because a church is not a voluntary society. You are united to Christ... along with *them*. You are going to have conflicts and you're going to get hurt. But you have peace for that battle so that there will still be greater peace. Right? In v. 2, Jehoshaba, the late King Ahaziah's sister, sets out to save Ahaziah's baby son, against Ahaziah's mother. I mean, talk about all in the family! But she has a peace about all of this in the midst of conflict because she knows whom she serves. His house is the house of the Lord.

- Finally, Christianity is a Certain Hope.

One of the reasons that Christmas is so important is the way that it comes. The smallness of it. God is an infant.

Because living in this world – a world in which no one can really find ultimate satisfaction – can eat at your heart, sap your strength, and kill your hope.

Think about Jehosheba. Athaliah's step-daughter has taken this one living heir – his little life is all that stands between the promises of God that a Messiah would one day come, and the evil of Satan, Baal, and death. For 7 years, this little boy is hidden like Anne Frank. Athaliah walks around as if she has won. Her tyrannical reign has begun. She is utterly safe from opposition. She believes that she and the god of the Baal have won and Yahweh is dead.

Jehosheba is living out Advent and Christmas. She is waiting, watching, hoping, praying. Those 7 years must have been hope giving as much as it was painful and excruciating to watch Athaliah kill or topple anything that had anything to do with the real God and his king.

That is where we are. We are in that place in the story where everyone thinks they know how the plot will end. But the Christian should know otherwise. There is hope. God is on the move. In this story in the smallest of ways. Sometimes you see God moving in what you don't see. You know, whenever a king takes over in the book of Kings, there is a statement, almost a formula: In the *something* year of king Jahu king of Israel, X, son of Y, began to reign in Judah. He did good/evil in the eyes of the Lord. But look down at what v 1 says: When Athaliah the mother of Ahaziah saw that her son was dead, she arose and destroyed all the royal family.

There is no one reigning under God. Only God reigns, you see. There is no one in control that God has installed or ordained. Except the king to come.

And how does God secure his promise to work through that child? Not by sending thunder bolts and striking down Athaliah. Not by plagues or floods, but by the faithful acts of his people in the face of opposition. By Jehosheba being faithful and saving the child, Jehoiada the priest organizing a faithful group of guards, by the guards obeying the priest in spite of danger to themselves.

You see so often the Lord works through the small works of his people doesn't he? That small word here or there. That act of loving kindness you show to a colleague, the simple sentence "you should come to my church." You may think those are small things, insignificant things, but it is through them that God's Kingdom can grow.

840 years later there was another decedent of David born. Another promised king who, like Joash, was hidden as a baby for fear of his life. Like Joash, this King would have to wait. But the day came when it was time to resurrect the old formula. That in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee... the word of God came to John ... in the wilderness. ³ And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming... 'Prepare the way of the Lord... and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.' "

He would reclaim his throne from those who would steal it, a king who overthrew all his enemies, even death itself. And he has set up a kingdom of hope that is for all people. Even those who reject him.

Friends, Jesus only appears impotent and defeated because he is patient. And you will see people attracted and drawn to him like the shepherds and the wise men, and you will have people who are out to kill him like Athaliah, Herod and the religious leaders.

But this gives hope. Because God, over and over, uses the despised, uses the unimportant, uses the things that the world does not respect, to bring his kingdom. How does God take on Goliath. Through a little shepherd boy. How does he talk to Elijah? Through an earthquake? No, through the still small voice. And how does he bring the salvation of the world? Through a boy hidden in Nazareth.

Some of you feel like you are small. Insignificant. You feel like your faith is being crowd out by science, naysayers, the professors and the glitterati. Some of you feel small because your own desires seem bigger than the desire of the ages.

Friends, Christmas turns the world's idea of success upside down. Over and over, the disciples ask Jesus – and I think we do, too – "Jesus, when are you going to take power and save the world?" And over and over, Jesus says, "I am going to lose power to save the world."

It's a great mystery. Some people miss the light that has come into the world because it seems so small. So insignificant when it sits beside the wisdom of this world. But Jesus Christ came to save sinners. The murder plot is complete. Jesus comes to be the victim of sin, evil and death, so that we may be saved.

Merry Christmas. The hope of the world has come.