Newspapers falsely reported that bands of armed black citizens were going on a rampage. White attackers burned down the churches of Rosewood, and then went after people in houses. Dozens died, both blacks and whites. By January 7, most of the town lay smoking in ruins, and the fleeing black citizens never returned. As for Fannie Taylor, the young white woman, some survivors believe that her bruises were inflicted by a white boyfriend. Jesse Hunter, the alleged escapee from the chain gang, was never found.

**The story remains the same.** The gospel of Matthew speaks of a voice in Ramah, a city in ancient Israel. You can change the location from Ramah to Rosewood, and the verse still makes perfect sense: *A voice is heard in Rosewood, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more* (2:18).

In both ancient Israel and modern America, we know the devastating impact of violence. Jesus faced deadly violence at the very beginning of his life. Right after the wise men left Bethlehem, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. “Get up,” he said, “take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him” (v. 13).

King Herod felt threatened by the birth of this baby who learned men identified as the king of the Jews. Herod did not want any competition, even from a child with no political or military power at his disposal. Feeling frightened and infuriated, Herod ordered a search and destroy mission to be carried out in Bethlehem.

Unfortunately, the feelings that drove Herod to violence are still alive and well. Rosewood was a prosperous black town in 1923, “with its own baseball team, a masonic temple and a few hundred residents.” A black survivor of the massacre says that what disturbed whites most about Rosewood was seeing a bunch of black folks “living better” than white folks. Such resentment can lead to violence, both then and now. From Bethlehem to Rosewood, the bloody story remains the same.

Look around today, and you see resentments that can lead to violence. Many residents of “red” states resent residents of “blue” states, and vice versa. Some citizens feel threatened by immigrants, and immigrants feel anxious in the United States. Fault lines appear between members of different racial and cultural groups. Schisms fracture Christian brothers and sisters who are either “too liberal” or “too conservative.” We look at the world and feel threatened, which is exactly what Herod experienced. But how would things be different if we looked at the world and saw the presence of God?

Herod had a once-in-a-lifetime chance to welcome the baby Jesus, the one-and-only Son of God. But he missed it because he was afraid. Herod sent his troops “to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under” (v. 16). He resorted to violence because he saw Jesus as a threat, and not as a gift from God.

**A gift, not a threat.** As followers of Jesus, we are challenged to see our neighbors as gifts, not threats. “When you meet another person,” says author and pastor John Pavlovitz, “you are coming face-to-face with a once-in-history, never-to-be-repeated reflection of the image of God.…each [is] made of God stuff.…Every single day you encounter thousands of breathing, animated thumbnails of the Divine.”

Every person you meet is good stuff, God stuff. It does not matter where they were born, whether they are old or young, red or blue, left-leaning or right-leaning; your neighbors are “thumbnails of the Divine.” They are gifts, not threats. Worthy of respect, not hostility. What a difference this viewpoint makes! Once we see our neighbors as gifts from God, we are challenged to take action to protect the most vulnerable people around us. They could be special-needs adults, low-income neighbors, recent immigrants, political refugees, members of a minority group, or neighborhood children. Joseph made the decision to protect the vulnerable when he “took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod” (vv. 14-15).

Joseph lived as an immigrant in that foreign land until an angel appeared to him and said it was safe to return to Israel. When he returned, he made a detour when he learned that the son of Herod was ruling over Judea. Instead of moving to Bethlehem of Judea, he headed north to Galilee, and there “he went and lived in a town called Nazareth” (v. 23). This story contains so many examples of vulnerability. Jesus and his family as political refugees, immigrants, members of a minority group in Egypt, and finally Southerners who settled in the North. Just as Joseph cared for his vulnerable child and wife, we are challenged to care for the at-risk people around us.

**How should we respond?** There were heroes at Rosewood who risked their lives to save others. John Wright, the white owner of the general store, allowed blacks to hide in his home. Two wealthy white brothers, John and William Bryce, sent a train to rescue black women and children. Many brave black women and men, including Sylvester Carrier, protected their children. A survivor of the massacre, a young girl, said, “Cousin Sylvester snatched me and said, ‘Come here, let me save you.…’ I squeaked down between his legs.”

When we hear “weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children” (v. 18), our challenge is to respond with compassion and care. We cannot cover our eyes and ears, ignoring the violence being done around us. When Jesus grew up and saw vulnerable people around him, he “had compassion on them” (Matthew 14:14). The Latin words *passio* and *com* which we render of the as “compassion,” literally mean “to suffer” and “with.” To have compassion is to “suffer with” people, to take their pain seriously and do what we can to alleviate it.

Jesus showed us the way when he healed the servant of a Roman centurion (Luke 7:5-13) and helped a Canaanite woman from the district of Tyre and Sidon (Matthew 15:21-28). Since he was familiar with suffering, he was never afraid to show compassion to people in need, even if they were outside of his religious or social or ethnic group. The Letter to the Hebrews says that because Jesus “himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested” (2:18).

From Bethlehem to Rosewood, from ancient Israel to 21st-century America, we need to identify with victims of racism, discrimination, and violence, the poor and oppressed, the widow and the orphan, and take action to protect the innocent and vulnerable people around us. Joseph did this when he took Jesus and Mary to Egypt. John Wright did this when he took black residents of Rosewood into his home. Sylvester Carrier did this when he defended his home and saved the children in his care. Today is not a happy anniversary, but maybe it is the first day in a new century of care for people in need.

Prayer: O Lord, open my eyes that I may see the needs of others. Open my ears that I may hear their cries. Open my heart so that they need not be without support. Let me not be afraid to defend the weak because of the anger of the strong, nor afraid to defend the poor because of the anger of the rich. Show me where love and hope and faith are needed and use me to bring them to those places. And so, open my eyes and my ears that I may this coming day be able to do some work of peace for You. In the name of Jesus, I pay. Amen.

**Sources:**

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* Pavlovitz, John. *If God is Love, Don’t Be a Jerk* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2021), 171.
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**From Bethlehem to Rosewood**

Sunday, January 1, 2023  [Matthew 2:13-23](https://biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+2%3a13-23&language=en&version=NRSVUE)

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Today is not a happy anniversary. It was 100 years ago, on January 1, 1923, that the Rosewood massacre began. Like the massacre of children in the gospel of Matthew, Rosewood reminds us of the devastating impact of violence, especially on the most vulnerable members of our communities.

Rosewood was a quiet, mostly African American town in Florida, originally settled by both black and white families. The town’s main industry was the production of pencils, but when the cedar tree population declined, most of the white people moved to the nearby town of Sumner. By the 1920s, Rosewood’s population was about 200 blacks, plus one white family who ran the general store.

On January 1, 1923, a young white woman in Sumner, Fannie Taylor, appeared covered in bruises. She claimed that a black man had assaulted her. Her husband, a foreman at a local mill, gathered a mob of white citizens to hunt down the assailant. He also called for help from neighboring counties, including 500 members of the Ku Klux Klan. The white mobs searched the woods for any black man they could find.

Law enforcement determined that a black prisoner named Jesse Hunter had escaped from a chain gang, which immediately made him the chief suspect. The mobs focused their search on Hunter and harassed black families they believed to be hiding him. In Rosewood, one mob pulled a black man out of his house, tied him to a car, dragged him to Sumner, and beat him. Another mob tortured a blacksmith until he took them to the spot where Hunter was said to be hiding. Not finding Hunter, the mob shot the blacksmith and hung him in a tree.

On the night of January 4, a mob of armed white men surrounded a house in which 25 people were hiding, mostly children. An exchange of gunfire left a black woman and her son dead. Two white attackers also died. The gun battle lasted overnight and ended when the whites broke down the door and the black children escaped into the woods.