

The second movie of the *Star Wars* franchise was released in 1980 and titled, *The Empire Strikes Back*.

In the first *Star Wars* movie, the rebel alliance wins its first victory against the evil Galactic Empire. And in the second movie, the evil Empire counterattacks.

This is not just the plotline for a set of movies. This is a real historical pattern. Evil empires often strike back.

This Christmas we've had the 75th anniversary of the World War II Battle of the Bulge, which took place in December 1944 and January 1945. Nazi Germany was on the ropes in June 1944 after the Normandy invasions. Later that year they were pushed back all the way across France and back into Germany itself.

But then in December, Hitler's evil empire struck back. Nazi Germany launched a massive surprise counterattack against the Americans.

Under cover of bad winter weather and the Ardennes forest, the Nazis hurled 200,000 troops against 100,000 American defenders, creating a dangerous bulge in the shape of the front lines, and trapping the 101st Airborne at a small yet strategic crossroads, the village of Bastogne.

As Christmas approached, the big question was whether these Americans could hold out against the enemy while they waited for relief to arrive.

Our Gospel lesson from 2nd chapter of Matthew follows a similar pattern. In chapter 1 Jesus, Jesus' coming birth is announced to Joseph. Joseph is told that Jesus will be the savior of people. And then Jesus is born. God is acting in the world. All is merry and bright.

But then, in chapter 2 of Matthew, the Empire strikes back.

It begins with our reading today. It's a little under our radar because our attention is easily drawn to the Christmas card images of the Magi, the Wisemen coming to worship baby Jesus bringing gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

But there's a conflict of Empires in this chapter. On one side, we have God's kingdom, God's empire. And on the other side we have the Roman Empire. And in Matthew 2 the focal point is the Roman's client king of Judea, King Herod.

The Magi may be wise when it comes to the ways of the stars, but I'm not sure about their street smarts. They come sauntering into King Herod's court and ask where the new king is. "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage."¹

We know from history that King Herod was so vicious in protecting his kingdom that he had a number of his own relatives killed so they wouldn't be a threat. And now the Magi are

¹ Matt 2:2

asking about a new king? A child king? It should be no surprise that the evil empire will strike back.

Herod puts up an insincere front. He sends the Wisemen down to Bethlehem in accordance with the prophecy of the Prophet Micah. Micah says that Bethlehem is where the Messiah will be born. And Herod adds, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage."²

Yeah. Sure.

The Magi go to Bethlehem and find the baby. They give the gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And then God warns the Magi in a dream not to return to Herod. Instead, they get out of Dodge and take another route back home.

Our reading stops there. But God doesn't stop, and neither does Herod. God doesn't only warn the Magi to leave. God also commands Joseph to take Mary and Jesus and flee to Egypt. And Joseph obeys.

And Matthew tells us that "When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men."

In other words, the empire strikes back and strikes back viciously. Jesus may have escaped. But the other young children of Bethlehem will not.

It's commemorated in one of our darkest Christmas carols, the Coventry Carol. The second verse says,

*Herod the King,
in his raging
charged he hath this day
his men of might,
in his own sight,
all young children to slay.³*

Now we're not talking about a slaughter of thousands of children or even hundreds of children. Given the size of Bethlehem, we're probably talking one or two dozen children at most. But for one or two dozen families, the empire striking back and slaughtering their innocent children is probably one of the worst things that would ever happen to them.

This action of Herod's sounds awfully harsh, and almost like something out of a twisted fairy tale. But there's no doubt about King Herod's brutality. Herod killed a couple of his own brothers in order to secure his claim to the throne. He later killed a couple of his own sons in order to preserve his throne. The Romans even had a joke about Herod, which was

² Matt 2:8

³ Hymnal #247

supposedly told by Caesar Augustus. Since Herod was Jewish and wouldn't eat pork, they said that it was safer to be Herod's pig than Herod's son, it was safer to be his "hüs" than his "hüios."

The slaughter of the Holy Innocents, the slaughter of the toddlers of Bethlehem, was certainly in character for Herod. But in spite of Herod's worst efforts, the infant Jesus escapes the sword.

This doesn't sound like a very appropriate close to the Christmas story. Renee and I have a couple of dozen different manger scenes at home that we've collected. Not a single one of those creches includes one of Herod's soldiers with a drawn sword. Not one of those creches includes a mother weeping over her dead toddler.

This part of Matthew seems like a rather sad ending to the Christmas story we're so familiar with. It stands in opposition to the sweetness and light of the images we usually have of the birth of Jesus. When we think of Christmas, the first images that usually spring to mind are not a family fleeing for their lives, or a bunch of toddlers lying dead in Bethlehem.

And yet, when God acted in the world by sending his son, the empire tried to strike back. The Empire tried to struck back when Jesus was a toddler, but he escaped.

Thirty years later, the empire would strike again. This time they executed Jesus on a cross. But that ferocious counterattack was in vain. God raised his son from death. The evil empires of this world may try to stop the kingdom of God, but they will not ultimately prevail.

God will always win in the end. As we heard in our Gospel lesson last week, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."⁴

Or as another translation says, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it."⁵

Empires will undoubtedly strike back. Despots and tyrants may lash out. They may counterattack. But they will never win the ultimate victory. In the end, God wins. Period. Full stop.

So when empires are striking back, sometimes we just have to ride things out.

In World War II, the Battle of the Bulge was a vicious counterattack. It ended up being the biggest battle Americans fought in in that war.

And US troops won the victory in that battle not by gaining ground. The US troops mainly won just by hanging on and hanging in there in the face of opposition.

The beleaguered 101st Airborne dug in in Bastogne and faced tremendous opposition.

⁴ John 1:5 NRSV

⁵ John 1:5 NLT

But they doggedly hung on until they could be relieved by reinforcements.

There's a great Hollywood movie about the Battle of the Bulge. It is the 1949 MGM classic, *Battleground*, released just 4 years after the events themselves. It stars a 33-year-old Van Johnson. But there are also a number of young future stars in this movie: a 29-year-old Ricardo Montalán; a 28-year-old James Whitmore, a 26-year-old James Arness.

The movie focuses in on one particular platoon. And the fighting is brutal and fierce. Wounded men who would normally be pulled out of the front lines have to stay and fight.

But against overwhelming odds, the soldiers hold firm. They're down to their last few rounds of ammunition. But the weather clears. New supplies are able to be dropped in by air. And the lead troops of General Patton's Third Army are able to break through and relieve them.

In the glorious final scene, the exhausted platoon is able to march rearward for some much-needed rest. The soldiers who have borne the brunt of the battle march out of Bastogne limping and weary.

But as a fresh unit approaches, one of the soldiers asks the sergeant to start chanting the marching cadence. The sergeant does, and the whole platoon begins their marching song. Their pace picks up, they march straighter. One of them moves his rifle from his left shoulder to his wounded right shoulder, in order that the platoon may march in proper formation. And as they leave Bastogne with their heads held high, they sing their marching cadence with pride, battered, but not defeated.

There will undoubtedly be times in our lives when we will be assaulted by the powers of Darkness. The empire may strike back from time to time.

But the Good News of Jesus Christ means that we can stand firm in the face of these counterattacks, for we know that our ultimate victory is assured.

Today we end the season of Christmas when we celebrate Jesus' birth. Tomorrow we begin the season of Epiphany when we celebrate his light shining out amidst the darkness that sometimes surrounds us and that sometimes strikes back against us.

But the darkness can never prevail.

Jesus light shines forth and cannot be extinguished.
God's love shines forth and will never be defeated.