

Innocent, But Slain For Sin

Matthew 2:13-23

Trinity Lutheran – Kearney, Missouri

December 29, 2019 – First Sunday After Christmas



Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. Though much of the world is now finished with Christmas, this festival, for the Church, is far more than just a one-day binge of buying, boozing, schmoozing and stuffing one's self – which is the way many of the people of our world celebrate this holiday. Christmas for us – that is, as the Church celebrates it – is supposed to be a full twelve-day festival of prayer, extending all the way to the day of the visitation of the Magi which we celebrate as Epiphany. So, even though many folks may have already packed up their Christmas lights and put the tree out on the curb for the trash collectors to haul away, *we* in the Church aren't quite finished yet.

Now, for a feast to be truly great, it needs to have both a mixture of the sweet and the savory – and Christmas is certainly no exception. Most of us, of course, are familiar with the sweet side of Christmas – the cuddly Baby in swaddling cloths lying in a manger while angels sing His praises, shepherds adore Him, and Mary and Joseph ponder all this in their hearts. But unless you're careful, the sweetness of this Season without the bitter Truth of sin and its consequences apart from Christ could easily turn into sappy sentimentality – into candy instead of nutritious food – into dessert rather than a well-balanced diet. For instance, December 26th was the Feast of St. Stephen – the first martyr of the post-Pentecost Church, who was stoned for proclaiming Jesus as the Christ. December 27th was the Feast of St. John, the Apostle, who wrote so clearly under inspiration of the Holy Spirit how the Word became Flesh. And although John didn't die a martyr's death, he lived during a time of great persecution.

Then there is the Feast of the Holy Innocents just yesterday, perhaps the bitterest of the bitter-sweet days of Christmas, when we remember how King Herod shed the blood of the baby boys of Bethlehem in a maniacal attempt to kill the Christ Child. This is the event referred to in verses 16 through 18 of this morning's Gospel, which vividly reminds us that Christmas has precious little to do with sugary sentimentality and a cute little Baby in swaddling cloths surrounded by chubby cherubs – or even less with the hectic crunch of what we call "the holidays." Rather, it reminds us that Christmas is all about the Incarnation of God – about how He became man to give His life for the life of the world.

In this text Matthew quotes a passage from the book of the prophet Jeremiah: "A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation, weeping, and great mourning – Rachel weep-

ing for her children, refusing to be comforted, because they are no more." But this wasn't the first time Rachel, the beloved bride of Jacob, was to be heard weeping for her slain children. She first wept in Jerusalem, as they were killed and carried off into exile. She wept in Bethlehem as they were slaughtered by Herod. She wept at Calvary, as her Son hung dead on the cross – slain for us. She also wept for those sons and daughters martyred for the cause of Christ – for Stephen, James, Peter and Paul – and all who suffered for confessing Jesus Christ. She weeps today for the martyrs of our own age – more numerous than ever. And she weeps over all her children who must suffer for Christ's sake under Communism, Islam, and all the King Herods of our own day who still hate the Savior and would like nothing better than if He had never lived at all.

In King Herod we are able to witness what happens when man desires to be lord and king of his own life. King Herod would stop at nothing to protect his power and position. He murdered his own wife, three sons, a mother-in-law, brothers-in-law, an uncle, and whomever else he might have thought posed a threat to his throne. He arranged for the murder of one of his sons while lying on his deathbed. And, in his last will and testament, he commanded that the leading men of the Jewish nation be rounded up and executed publicly at the moment of his passing – to ensure "an honorable mourning at the time of his funeral." Caesar Augustus once sneered that it would be safer to be a pig in Herod's pen than a son living in his house.

In Herod we see what's really at work in ourselves. When man puts himself on a throne to be lord and king of his life, his children suffer for generations – indeed, as God says in His Word, "unto the third and fourth generations of those that hate Me." When we selfishly build our own thrones and then jealously guard them, our children always suffer. They're neglected by parents too busy to invest time in them. They're treated like so much excess baggage, handed off like footballs between makeshift families, abandoned in dumpsters, abused by those they trust, or aborted even before they have a chance at life. In fact, according to the latest statistics, it seems that there are about 186 unborn children killed each year in this country for every 1,000 live births – for no other reason than their parents' immorality or irresponsibility.

What do you suppose the baby boys of Bethlehem did to deserve such a fate? Nothing, other than the fact that they were born at that time, and in that place – and for no

other reason except they were the same age and gender as Jesus. In Herod's mind, you see, any of them could have been "this One who was born King of the Jews" – this One who was being sought by the Magi. We call them "martyrs" because they bore witness to the rejection of Jesus in their own bodies. Israel had rejected the Messiah, and these little ones would pay the price for his unbelief. But Baptism puts you in the same place as the holy innocents of Bethlehem – that is, if you don't hide your resemblance to Christ under a rock. If you dare let your light shine before others, you too may find out what St. Paul meant when he wrote: "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of His body, that is, the Church" – or what St. Peter meant when he wrote: "Rejoice in so far as you share {in} Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when His glory is revealed."

So then, these little one are rightly called the "holy innocents" – but not because they had no sin, for we know from God's Word that we are all conceived and born in this state. Even the tiniest of newborns is in need of the grace of forgiveness. Remember, these were little Jewish boys who had been circumcised according to the Law – "Baptized," if you will, in the Old Testament sense – under the grace and protection of the Old Covenant. Like us, they were also holy and innocent by God's grace for the sake of Jesus. Neither forgotten nor ignored, they were pressed into His service, just as we are – and are therefore rightly counted with us as the first fruits of the redeemed in Christ. They are part of the company of the saints in heaven, who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

But none of this makes any sense apart from Jesus – without whom this is just simply another example of man's cruelty to man – a tyrant king's pursuit of power on the backs of his people – the senseless slaughter of innocent children. But Matthew tells us this took place to fulfill the Word of the Lord which was spoken by the prophets. Indeed, three times Matthew shows us how this event fulfills God's Word. First, there was the flight to Egypt, out of which God called His Son. There was the death of the babies of Bethlehem, with "Rachel weeping for her children." And there was the move to Nazareth so that Jesus might bear the stigma of being called and known as a "Nazarene." So *nothing* in this account is accidental or out of God's control. At every turn God's hand is at work, effecting salvation under the seemingly opposite signs of violence and death. Hidden behind Rachel's weeping is her joy. Hidden behind the defeat of God is His victory. Hidden behind death is God's life.

The hour of Jesus' death had not yet arrived. His Life – which had come for the life of the world, had to be pro-

tected. So the Lord of Hosts was whisked off to Egypt by His mother and foster father, making us thankful to God for the quiet, faithful obedience of Joseph, who heard the angel's warning in a dream and acted upon it. The trip to Egypt was a reverse Exodus back to the land of slavery, so that God might call His Son out from there – so that *He* might be God's obedient Israel – so that *He* might die as God's Lamb who takes away the sin of the world.

The baby boys of Bethlehem died for Jesus that day – so that Jesus could die for them another day. And it's in Jesus' holy, innocent, bitter suffering and death, that they – and indeed, all who receive Him through faith – find their life. Their death is a picture of Jesus' death – a pure, holy sacrifice that conquers sin, death, the devil, and the "Herod" that's in all of us. To die now and forever is the end for all who reject the Child born in Bethlehem. But King Jesus lives, and therefore all who have died together with Him also live – including the holy innocents of Bethlehem. So, the question posed to us today is this: "Will you receive Him who came to us by way of a virgin mother – who comes to us now in His Word and Supper? Will you let His love have its way with you – even to the point of death? Or will you be numbered among those who reject Him, who murder Him through hatred and neglect of our neighbor?" "No one can serve to masters," Scripture teaches – it's either King Herod or King Jesus.

Dear Christian, God has claimed you to be His child. You've been Baptized and numbered among the holy innocents of Israel. That means the death of the Herod in you, and of everything that stands in the way of God's will to save you. It means the death of your sin – for while King Herod must die, King Jesus must reign in your heart. And in the end, His life and death mean eternal life for you with God. Though the fields of Bethlehem may have been soaked with innocent blood that day – blood which cried out for heavenly vengeance, as when Cain slew his brother Abel – this Word of God is meant to be a comfort for you who now must ponder this event. This thing happened so that God's Son – the Word made flesh for our salvation – might be taken to safety into Egypt – so that He might be called out of Egypt, grow up in Nazareth, die and rise in Jerusalem, and live and reign forever in Majesty at God's Right Hand. This is the One who came to bring light to those who sit in darkness, life to those who dwell in the shadow of death, gladness to those who grieve, and joy to those who weep. This is the One who has come to save us and our children with His blood, and to wipe every tear from our eyes. Thanks be to God for His mercy and grace in this Child who has come to save us. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus, unto life everlasting. Amen.