

The Holy Innocents, Martyrs (a)
Isaiah 63:7-9 Hebrews 2:10-18 Matthew 2:13-23
St. John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH
January 1, 2023 [Traditional]

We've been cherishing the Christmas scriptures: Jesus, lying in a manger with his loving parents holding him, caring for him. The animals standing close by. The shepherds sharing the amazing news they've just heard from the angels. It's a humble, peaceful, joyful scene. God and human beings have united. It's a scene where time seems to kind of come to a halt. Everything stands still.

But now, just a week after Christmas, we come to one of the most horrific events recorded in the bible: King Herod, sending out his death squads to massacre the children. And look at how Joseph and Mary are on the run in the gospel lesson, dodging all these dangers. Fleeing to Egypt with their baby. When they come back after Herod dies, they know Jesus is just as much in danger from the new guy, Archelaus. They have to quietly sneak up to Galilee so he won't get wind of them. So almost immediately, after the beautiful, timeless Christmas scene, Joseph and Mary are running like crazy to keep their child alive.

In the glow of Christmas, it's easy to forget that from the moment he was born, people are trying to snuff Jesus out. King Herod is a smart man. He knows that this long-awaited child—the Messiah of God—poses a threat to his authority. So he does everything he can to stomp out the threat.

The world has not changed. It's funny so many think we're beyond such barbarity, such savagery. But the 20th century witnessed more genocide and mass human cruelty than any other in history. Some would argue that the seeds of much greater evils are being sown right now, in our time. Regardless, in our own lifetime, we right here have seen devils *a lot worse* than Herod the Great.

So the *biblical* account of Jesus' birth doesn't really have the pixie dust quality that people try to drum up at this time of year. The biblical account of Christmas is beautiful, but in a *spine-tingling* kind of way. Because from another angle—and it's a very true angle—really it's like a little baby is being lowered into the jaws of a beast. What's going to happen to this helpless, vulnerable child? The incarnation of God in this world is beautiful only because we know that Easter is the end of the story. Otherwise, as the duck in the movie *Babe* puts it, "Christmas is carnage!"

The Christ-child comes into a threatening world where human beings want absolute power, where husbands and wives don't get along, where families are broken, where wise elders are ignored, forgotten, set aside. Where people are enslaved to the technology that was supposed to set them free. Where young people are taught that the one unchanging truth in life is that there is no truth.

But this is the world that God loves enough to give his life for. It's mind-boggling to think that God takes a risk. But throughout scripture, he puts things in human hands. In the Old

Testament, he puts his plan in human hands, even though he has to intervene regularly to get things back on course. With Jesus, he goes all the way. He puts himself bodily into history, into human hands. God is love. And is there any true love in this world that doesn't carry a risk with it? The Second Person of the Trinity became one of us, he came to us in the flesh, knowing full well that we could deny him, and push him aside, reject him, (which we did). Jesus, in his love, subjected himself to the wear of time. Jesus, in his love for us, lost everything. Just like you and I do. And when he rose from the dead...that was not to get away, leave the world behind and go back to heaven. That was him sealing the deal, *binding* himself to us—and all the dangers we face today—in an unbreakable bond through the Holy Spirit. Jesus is closer to you and me right now, right here today in this sanctuary, than he was to his disciples when they followed him through Galilee. And his resurrection doesn't mean there's not still a price—a risk—involved in what we're doing here. God is still putting his name, his reputation, his gospel, in our hands...yours and mine.

It helps to picture ourselves carrying the baby. Joseph and Mary did their part in their time; now God gives him to us. Christians are tempted to adopt this fatalistic attitude, that "oh well, everything will turn out all right...God's in control anyway. After all, Jesus rose from the dead—he's all...spiritual now. Nothing can touch him. I don't have to stand for him in any way that involves risking *myself*." That's a falsehood that a lot of drifting Christians are swallowing today.

Theologically speaking, people want to take Jesus out of the body, because that enables them to take themselves out of the equation. For example, you know how people think they can be spiritual but not religious. They don't think they need to hear the word regularly or live in it. They don't need the Body of Christ (the Church). They don't need to make actual time for their relationship with God; they don't need the Sabbath; they don't need prayer. They don't need to actually talk about Jesus. They don't need to keep learning and growing in the faith.

Understand, all of these are attempts to take Jesus out of his body. It's like celebrating Christmas and then denying the incarnation the next day. It's to protect ourselves from the risk, the responsibility, and sometimes the danger that comes with carrying the baby like Joseph and Mary did. God still wants to be in the body. He wants us to embody him in our lives. In the resurrection he sealed the deal. So now we are called by God to wage spiritual warfare and to bear His name, His identity, His reputation with us, wherever we go. You and I know this. I'm preaching to the choir, I know it. Praise God, the fact that we're here today shows we understand that God has taken up his residence in our bodies. He changes how we order our calendars.

But we need to understand the temptations that are out there...the powers that are always trying to stamp the light out. Today, King Herod is using different tactics. He's not coming with soldiers...yet. He's just telling Christians, "as long as you don't say your baby is special, I won't have any problem with you. As long as you do not embody him and talk about him, as long as you keep him to yourself, I won't come after you." Truth is, a lot of Christians over the past few decades have said, "well—it is easier that way. If I don't put Jesus out there into the world where there's a risk to him and a risk for me, if I just keep Jesus in the back room with Johnny playing video games, no sweat off my back." Well, the truth is that where there is no risk, where there is no potential price, there is no faith. And I'm also sad to say...that safe place is also where a

person's *love* goes to die. Even their love for Jesus. That is happening, all around us.

In today's gospel, Joseph and Mary are running around like crazy, because they've taken personal responsibility for the gift God has given them. It's interesting to speculate, what would have happened if they had stayed in Bethlehem, and the young Jesus had been there when the soldiers came. I'm sure God would have found a way to work around it. Interesting to speculate. But not for Joseph and Mary. All they knew was, that precious boy was in their hands. Faith does not stay motionless in a timeless scene by the manger. Faith is always ready to pick up and go. God is still pouring himself out in the world for love. Believers around this world are still faithfully risking everything for love of Him.

Of course, we do have a big advantage over Joseph and Mary. We know the rest of the story. The darkness is still doing everything it can to put out the light for the people around us. We need to speak faithfully into the darkness. We must not keep Jesus in the back room. We need to respond. But not with fear. We speak, we work, we play, we live...and we die...we die to it all...with love and joy in our hearts. Because we know that this light we carry in Christ in this world is the final light that is going to bring the power of Herod down in the end. Just like the child born in the stable has brought you and me to our knees in love and worship, he's going to bring all those powers of death and hatred down in the end. And you and I will be there together, praising the King, greeting the new day when it comes.