

Sermon for January 1, 2017 – “Hark, the Herod...”

1st Sunday after Christmas, Year A – Text(s): Isaiah 63:7-9; Matthew 2:13-23

I read a story recently about a pastor at a church in Indiana remembering his first Christmas there. He'd decided that the church would have a Christmas Eve Candlelight Communion service, the first ever. He wanted everything to be perfect. It almost was. Snow fell that afternoon. A junior in high school played “What Child Is This” on the flute. The Advent candles were lit. They sang the carols “O Come, All Ye Faithful,” “Away in a Manger,” and “O Little Town of Bethlehem”. They read the story, Mary, Joseph, the baby, and the manger. The pastor thought: This is a Hallmark card of a worship service. This is as picture-perfect as it gets, as good a Christmas moment as any church has ever known. That's when Danny's beeper went off. Danny was a member of the local volunteer fire department. When his beeper sounded, as it often did, he ran out of the sanctuary. The congregation had gotten used to it, but it was still disconcerting. Then they started singing “Silent Night”. As they got to “Wondrous Star, lend thy light,” Danny ran back in and shouted that one of the church member's mother's house was on fire. The member and his family ran after Danny. Danny's wife got up and left. Everyone else had to choose between listening to the preacher's sermon or slipping out one by one and going to a big fire. By the time the sermon had Mary and Joseph reaching Bethlehem, the crowd using the term loosely was made up of those who were waiting for a ride home and those who'd fallen asleep. That's not how Christmas Eve Candlelight Communion services are supposed to turn out. Tragedies should wait until January because they don't fit our ideas about Christmas. That's why King Herod doesn't fit the Christmas story. He shows up towards the end of the story of the Magi we read next week. But, the horrifying sequence of events that we read about in Matthew's Gospel this morning doesn't feel like it belongs in the Christmas story.

The most difficult part to cast in the Christmas pageant is Herod, if we even cast him at all. Walmart sells a variety of plastic Nativity scenes for the yard but there are no glow-in-the-dark King Herods. No Christmas card has this verse from Matthew on the front: **“A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation.”** This part of the story may not seem to fit but we need to hear it. Like lots of stories, we need to hear the **whole** story or we get it wrong. Every true story admits that even in the midst of blinking decorations and flickering candles, darkness threatens the light. Ignoring the darkness is ignoring reality. We leave King Herod out of the Christmas story...Why? Because we think we're supposed to keep the hardships of the world away from Christmas.

Matthew says that Christmas came in the days of King Herod. Now, King Herod was like Joseph Stalin. He executed his favorite wife, his brother-in-law, and three of his sons because he thought they wanted his crown. In view of such executions, the emperor Augustus reportedly quipped, “It is better to be Herod's pig than Herod's son!” But I digress... It occurs to me as I read this story that we usually imagine angels speaking in soft, reassuring tones. The angel in Joseph's dream shouted: “Wake up! Hurry! Run!”. They escaped to Egypt. They were far from home but the baby was safe. Tragically, not everyone was safe. Herod ordered the death of every boy in Bethlehem two years old and younger. Matthew can't find words terrifying enough to describe the horror so he borrows words from the prophet Jeremiah... **“Wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children...She refused to be consoled, because they are no more.”** The first Christmas was soldiers with swords in the streets, mothers clutching their babies, hiding in the closet, trying not to breathe too loudly, begging their infants not to cry. There aren't many questions more impossible to answer than, “Why couldn't the angel have warned them too?”

Even the birth of the new King didn't stop the suffering. It's not surprising that we skip this part of the story. It's easy to understand why there's no carol in our hymnal about the slaughter of the innocents. Perhaps there should be because we need to understand that Christmas is God's response to our sorrows.

There's a story of another pastor who'd gotten a phone call from a local funeral director on December 23. The night before an elderly person had died in one of the local nursing homes. The pastor was asked to lead a graveside service the next morning. The funeral director explained that they'd normally have the service a day later or at least in the afternoon but he "didn't want the family to associate the experience with Christmas." Weather-wise, Christmas Eve was miserable. The snow had been on the ground for more than a week. It had rained and so the snow wasn't pretty. The temperature was in the twenties. It was threatening to rain again. Two members of the deceased's family met the pastor at the cemetery. There were six people there...the two family members, the funeral director, two women from our church, and the pastor. He knew what he'd been told: "We don't want them to associate this experience with Christmas." He kept thinking about the story that Matthew tells. Christmas is mothers crying because their children have died...**"Wailing and loud lamentation . . . [Refusing] to be consoled, because they are no more."** If we have to stand at a graveside on Christmas Eve or at any point during the Christmas season, we need to remember the hope that comes with Christmas. The part of this story that we often leave out; the sadness, suffering, the death is the most important. It's this part, the hard part, that explains why this child is a holy child. When we remember the story, we need to remember all of it. The story tells us that the Christ child was born into bedlam, mayhem, the madness which is our world. The Child was born because, pervasive as this reality about us is, it is not **all** we are. The story was written to give us hope. The story tells us that our salvation is born in the midst of such times, into the heart of our darkness, in a moment when time is shattered and new time begins. And our salvation is brought to us by a survivor of the worst that can befall – by a child. By a child whose light was not extinguished. A child who understands deeply what has happened. A child who remembers. A child who was not killed. **This** is the Child who grows in wisdom and stature. **This** is the Child who amazes the rabbis in the temple. **This** is the Child who has a perspective unlike anyone else's. **This** is the Child who would soon enough know pain and sorrow of His own. The story tells us that the people of Bethlehem were barely aware of this Child. Devastated by grief, picking up their splintered lives, their broken hearts, their fears, they found something else among the wreckage. They found the words that promise that the Messiah would be born to them, especially to them. They carried this promise, in tears as they buried their dead children.

And here's the thing, the story tells us that God does not abandon us to face our peril alone. It tells us that the hope of our time lives among survivors. We cannot outrun, outgun, or outwit what is evil and monstrous in this world. But in facing the truth of our reality we can see light in its darkness. We can hear angels singing there for it's into this reality that Christmas comes. May we remember that Christmas comes to meet our desperate need.

Christmas is about Emmanuel. God with us in that need. It's about God coming into the worst places and into the most painful circumstances of our lives to share our suffering to care for us in the midst of tragedy. A man of sorrows, acquainted with grief Christ has come to bear ours. We have **not** been left alone. We will **never** be left alone.

Christmas is the promise that God's joy is deeper than our sadness, far deeper. That ultimately life is more powerful than death, that the light shines even in the darkness and that the darkness can never overcome it! A word of hope... A word of promise as we begin a new year!

Come, Lord Jesus.

Amen and amen.