

Epworth Chapel on the Green
December 28, 2014
First Sunday of Christmas/
Feast of the Holy Innocents
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Jeremiah 31:15-17
Psalm 124
Revelation 21:1-7
Matthew 2:13-18

Today we find ourselves at an intriguing place in the church calendar. We have come through the beautiful season of Advent, and we have stepped through the door into the wonderful season of Christmas. Like Mary, we have pondered in our hearts the immensity of how God has smuggled himself into the world through a teenage girl. With Charles Wesley, we have found ourselves awestruck over the fact that the eternal God has been “contracted to a span,” and “incomprehensibly made man.”

We now get to enjoy the beautiful hymns of Christmas. What child is this, who laid to rest on Mary’s lap is sleeping? Why, this is Christ the King, whom shepherds guard and angels sing! Haste, haste, to bring him laud, the babe, the son of Mary.

This beautiful hymn, set to the tune of Greensleeves, is a favorite of many. But we might wonder: why all the fuss about making haste and coming quickly to greet him? What’s the rush? Can’t we just enjoy the moment? Can’t we simply revel in the joy of this occasion for a while? Can’t we just enjoy Christmas?

The answer to that question is both “yes” and “no”. Of course we should take a deep breath and enjoy the beauty and mystery of Christmas. We should allow ourselves time to ponder in our hearts what this all means.

But we’re not given the luxury of too much time, because Jesus’ parents are packing him up and fleeing quickly to Egypt. They are on the run because King Herod is searching for Jesus in order to kill him. For Herod, Jesus’ arrival does not signal hope and promise, but a threat. Herod is an evil, insecure man who will stop at nothing to secure his own power, including murdering his own wife and children.

Afraid that he might be bumped from his throne, Herod orders the slaughter of all boys two years old and younger. Herod had grilled the Magi, learned their astrological calculations, and determined that the new king of the Jews, if such a child had been born, could be no more than two years old. So He sent his henchmen to do the dirty deed.

Matthew is the only Gospel writer to mention this horrific incident, and it is gruesome to contemplate it. In Pier Paolo Pasolini’s *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, it was portrayed by horsemen galloping through Nazareth, wrestling the babies from the arms of their mothers, who fought valiantly, but who eventually lost the struggle.

Scholars are divided about the number of children who died that day. But when Herod's horsemen departed, Matthew tells us that the *moaning* and the *mourning* that rose from the village could be heard five miles away in Ramah.

From the earliest history of the church, these children were considered to be *martyrs*, because they died not only *for* Christ but also *instead of* Christ.

Remembrance of their sacrifice has been observed in the West from the fourth century of the Christian era. In the West, they have been known as "the holy innocents," and in the East, "the holy children." In the fifth century, St. Augustine described them as *flores martyrum*, i.e., as "buds killed by the frost of persecution the moment they showed themselves." For centuries in England, this day was called *Childermas*.

David Hugh Farmer, writing in the *Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, says: "The Church honors all who die in a state of innocence and consoles parents of dead children with the conviction that these also will share the glory of the infant companions of the infant Jesus."

As we ponder in our hearts what the birth of Jesus means, we see very soon that his coming involves not only the promise of joy, peace, and hope -- his coming also presents a challenge and a threat to the powers of darkness and to the entrenched power of earthly kings and kingdoms.

Jesus' coming can be threatening, not merely to Herod, but also to us. For he comes to shine the light into our hearts, to put to death in us all that is not God's best for us, to shake us out of the status quo and take us on a journey of adventure and discovery. But something in us, something in our human nature, resists that. The darkness in all of our hearts forces Joseph and Mary to grab Jesus quickly, and to flee to Egypt. The Love that can heal us and save us comes to us, but we struggle to embrace it.

When I was a teenager, our local church always did a live nativity scene at Christmas time. It was a big production. We would sometimes even bring in live animals. We had the costumes, the lights, the whole production. We had shepherds, angels, wise men, the complete package.

But in the years that Connie and I participated in that event, I do not recall one single time when Joseph and Mary ever grabbed Jesus out of the cradle, bundled him up, and ran off into the night in order to flee the wrath of Herod. The closest thing we got to that was Mary and Joseph scurrying off to the fellowship hall for hot chocolate, while a new Mary and Joseph quickly ran out to take their place before a set of headlights appeared in the distance!

But what Herod did was real, and is a real part of the Christmas story. It reminds us that the precious gift that arrived for us in the manger was a gift procured at the greatest possible cost. It reminds us that although God's love for

us is deep and profound, our brokenness and our self-sufficiency is also deep, and pushes hard to reject that love. And in some cases, we try to destroy that Love. In an act unimaginable to us, Herod orders the murder of innocent children. Their lives become little more than “collateral damage” to him as he flees from the Love that has come to heal him and save him.

The Good News of Christmas, however, is that God’s love to us in Christ cannot be thwarted or defeated. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it.

There is a collect that was written for this day. I’m unsure of the exact source, but the collect reads as follows:

O God, whose praise the martyred innocents did this day proclaim, not by speaking, but by dying: Destroy in us all the malice of sinfulness, that our lives may also proclaim thy faith, which our tongues confess; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

As we come to the Lord’s Table today, let us come with humility and gratitude for the love of God in Christ, given to us in this season. Let us come also with the painful awareness of the darkness in each of our hearts that is prone to reject and resist that love. And in the midst of this wonderful season, let us receive the grace he offers us with joy.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.