

“The Holy Innocents” Matthew 2:1-18 Holy Innocents 2025

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Two weeks ago on my drive to Stratford, I was listening to a podcast from a Lutheran pastor that I really enjoy. He has a solid theology and is very focused on the social ministry of the Gospel – my kind of guy! That day he said something surprising. I remember clearly when he asked his listeners, “is it ok to pray for evil men to die?” and then spoke about a world leader who he prays to bring to repentance, and if that isn’t possible, then for this person to die and stop the suffering that they cause. He even said that on the day this person does pass away, millions of people will celebrate. I won’t mention the specific leader, as the pulpit is not the place for politics.

Just a few days ago we celebrated the joyous holiday of Christmas! We sang songs like, “Joy to the World”, we echoed the joyous strains of the angels in “Angels We Have Heard on High”, and with all the faithful we were joyful and triumphant as we sang, “O Come All Ye Faithful”. Even the secular world around us could not escape the infectious joy of the season. People seemed more upbeat. Smiles were shared with abandon, as were the greetings of “Merry Christmas” and “Happy Holidays”. In our society, Christmas is expected to be a time of happiness and laughter, a time for merriment and good cheer, a time for blocking out--at least temporarily--all the unpleasant and painful aspects of life.

But here we are just a few days later, and the Gospel lesson reports one of the most tragic events of the first century. Every year, December 28 is set aside as the Commemoration of the Holy Innocents. If there is any event in the Bible that could be further removed from an upbeat, cheerful holiday mood, I don’t know what it is. Herod’s slaughter of the innocent children of

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Bethlehem is a singularly horrifying, brutal, and tragic story. Yet it comes hard on the heels of Christmas every year.

Our Gospel lesson today tells us everything we need to know about Herod’s slaughter of the Holy Innocents. The background to this story is familiar enough. Matthew 2:1-2

“After Jesus is born in Bethlehem, during the days of King Herod, wise men from the east come to Jerusalem, asking, “Where is he who is born king of the Jews? We have seen his star in the east and have come to worship him.”

King Herod hears this, and this is not the kind of stuff he likes to hear. “Another king of the Jews? What about me? Where would that leave me? I’m the only king around here. I’m not going to let some little upstart challenging me for my throne.” But Herod is a sly and crafty old crook. He’s not going to come right out and tell the wise men all this. That would scare them off. No, Herod wants the wise men to lead him right to the little king.

We see Herod’s strategy in Matthew 2:4-8,

“When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born.”“In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written:

”“But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.”

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and

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said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

Of course this is a lie. Herod doesn't want to worship the newborn King, he wants to wipe Him out. The wise men are warned in a dream not to go back to Herod and they don't. So Herod gets stood up, and he doesn't like that very much. Herod has no idea which of the baby boys in Bethlehem is the One. So just to make sure he gets the right one, Herod hands down a death sentence to all of them--all the baby boys in Bethlehem, up to two years old.

The soldiers are dispatched. The deed is done. This is a crime so unspeakable and heinous, the details are hard even to contemplate, much less to describe. What kind of a monster could do such a thing? What is as senseless and tragic as the violent death of innocent babes? What grief is as profound as the grief of parents who can do nothing but helplessly stand by and watch as their little ones are murdered? Try to imagine the sorrow of those mothers in Bethlehem: Jeremiah the prophet foretells this event in his book, chapter 31:15: *"A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more."* Is there any comfort, is there any hope, for these mothers of Bethlehem? Yes, there is. And that comfort and hope is embodied in the one baby boy who escaped the massacre of Bethlehem. The One who would grow up to be the King of Kings. Joseph is warned in a dream to take Mary and baby Jesus and flee the country. The little Messiah is carried to safety, He is brought to Egypt. God is not going to allow His only Son to be cut down...at least not yet.

God had protected His chosen deliverer once before. Many, many centuries earlier there was another evil king who wanted to kill a bunch of

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Israelite baby boys. But the Lord had a little baby he wanted to keep alive. That time, the one who escaped the massacre was baby Moses. This time it's baby Jesus. That time the baby was already in Egypt. This time the baby goes down to Egypt. Moses had a great mission in front of him: to lead the people of Israel out of bondage in Egypt and bring them to the Promised Land of Canaan. Jesus had an even greater mission in front of him: to lead people of all nations out of bondage to sin, death, and the power of the devil, and lead them to the Promised Land of His eternal Kingdom, which has no end.

There was evil in the world at the time of Moses. There was evil in the world at the time of Christ. And it is obvious, that there is evil in the world today. We see it very clearly in evil men like Pharaoh, Herod and Saddam. But as we point our fingers at their horrible sins and hideous acts, we remember that we are in no position to accuse. The same sins which drove these despicable despots, drives you and me too; selfish pride, jockeying for position in this world, and craving power and control no matter on what level and no matter the cost. You might not sit in a palace and cook up schemes to eliminate those who oppose you, but you are guilty of the same sin when you hold a grudge against someone you are called to forgive. You might not sneak through the streets at night intent on murdering, but when you sneak behind someone's back and spitefully wield the weapon of gossip, you commit the same crime. You might not ever be in a position to send out troops to cut people down in their tracks, but the hateful words you send out from your mouth accomplish the same sinful goal. It is easy to see evil in people like Adolph Hitler, Slobodan Milosevic, Vladimir Putin and Saddam Hussein--it is easy to see sin in the world around us--but we would be blind not to recognize

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the sin and evil that dwells in each one of our lives. God’s Word tells us in 1 John 1:8-10:

“If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives. BUT, BUT if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”

Did you hear that? That’s why it was necessary for baby Jesus to survive the slaughter of Bethlehem, so that he could grow up and die. There would come a time when Jesus would stand before another Herod, and a governor named Pontius Pilate. At that time, brutal soldiers would get their hands on Him. In that place He would indeed be massacred. The Christ of Christmas had to live, in order that the Christ of Calvary might die-and rise again in Victory, for sinners like you and me.

A true Christmas, is celebrated only in light of these “eternity-changing” events. Our Christmas celebration and joy are tempered with the solemn remembrance of the Holy Innocents of Bethlehem who died. But more than that, it is tempered with the solemn remembrance of the only One who was truly Holy, the only Innocent one, we remember His death on a cross. But we also have the eternal hope of the empty tomb. It is here that we find a word of comfort, deep comfort, for those who suffer. For those of us who know all too well the active part we have played in the evil that plagues this world, it is here and only here that we find forgiveness. Full and complete forgiveness. It has been given to you.

The effects of sin, suffering and death will not cease on this side of heaven. So where is the hope, where is the comfort? It is here in the story of

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the Holy Innocents. Christ was spared so that He could spare you, and He has. It is here in His death on Calvary's cross, a death the He died in your place, a death that 3 days later was swallowed up by Life. It is here, today, for you, because we know a Day is coming when all the strife will cease and all the crying will end. On that Day, the eyes of the mothers of Bethlehem will be dried. On that Day, the tears of those who have suffered at the hands of evil dictators, past and present, their tears will cease to flow. On that Day, you and I who mourn because of our earthly sorrows, will rejoice forever in our heavenly reward. That is the comfort that carries us through all our Christmases. That is the promise that makes a Christmas truly Merry, that is the joy that never fails and never fades away!

Herod, despite his best attempts, did not have this day. Death does not have this day. In fact, the whole reason behind Christmas was to overthrow the power of death and sin and hell. So when death creeps up and grabs a loved one, the Christ of Christmas kicks death in the teeth and says, “You can't keep that one. They're mine.”

Death, where is thy sting? Stuck somewhere under the mistletoe, I suspect. The needles fly back onto the tree and turn green. Falling stars rise and shine, re-sharpened. My cold tea steams up again. The candle relights. Appropriate, hopeful words spill from my pen onto cards. And Christmas, if not always merry, is always, ALWAYS victorious. Thanks be to God. Amen