

Sermon on Matthew 2:13-23
First Sunday of Christmas, January 1, 2017
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Well, you and I both knew that it was too much to ask: that the innocence and quiet beauty of the feast of Christmas last for another week. Just one week ago we gathered on a late night for Christmas Eve with candlelight, to hear the story of angels giving good news of peace and a child's birth to shepherds outside of Bethlehem, and the singing of Silent Night. Then a Christmas morning of more carols and the good news of God's light shining in the world's darkness as the Word became flesh in Jesus the Christ, and several days of gathering with families for those of us fortunate to have them. But although the church calendar may say that there are Twelve Days of Christmas for us to celebrate, we know that the quiet bliss can never last. Life is not a Hallmark Christmas movie with happy endings. The reality is that we live in a fallen, suffering world of darkness looking for light and praying for God's presence and healing.

So today we hear an angel's urgent warning, of the holy family fleeing to Egypt from a jealous king's fury, and the terrible story of the slaughter of innocent children in Bethlehem at the hands of the king's soldiers. The Christmas carols sung innocently and sweetly are gone, replaced by the ironic melancholy of bittersweet songs like *The Coventry Carol*, which names King Herod's rage and the grief stricken wails of mothers for their dying children. Today's gospel slaps us in the face with the reality in which we live, when children today in Aleppo are slaughtered by bombs and bullets rained down from the skies from a modern King Herod named Bashar al-Assad, the president of Syria, and his regime, who seek to hold onto power even at the cost of so many thousands of innocent civilians.

Today's story begins with a dream, an angel's appearance to Joseph while he slept, after the wise men from the East had departed from their visit bearing gifts. Unfortunately we had no time to hear this familiar, symbolic story of three *magi* who studied the stars, and had come to Bethlehem following a new and strange star that appeared over the place of Jesus' birth. Finding the new-born child, they had entered the house with joy, bearing gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, gifts fit for royalty, but also gifts to prepare his body with anointing for his future burial. Strange gifts, with an foreboding edge. Then their visit was cut short, as an angel appeared to the *magi* in a dream not to return to Herod, who meant to harm the child, and so they went back with haste to their own country by another road.

This is where today's gospel picks up the story, as the angel also appeared to Joseph in a dream, warning him to flee from King Herod, who wished to destroy the child. No "fear not, I bring you good news of great joy" this time! Instead it

was, “Be very afraid! Take your family and run away!” So Joseph took Mary and Jesus that very night and fled to Egypt, the country where the Pharaoh had once slaughtered the Hebrew first born, while King Herod sent his soldiers into Bethlehem to do their dirty work. So the Holy Family became what we would today call refugees, fleeing from political persecution, from a paranoid King who feared for his throne. And the mothers of Bethlehem cried out in their grief, like Rachel weeping for her children in Ramah, refusing to be consoled. It was an all-too-common lament in the ancient world, by mothers who wept for their sons and daughters who became the “collateral damage” of the thirst for political power by emperors and kings – a world that hasn’t changed at all today; only the names are different. The gospel passage ends when Herod dies, and an angel tells Joseph in another dream that it is safe to return home. So Joseph, Mary, and the child Jesus left Egypt and returned home to Nazareth, because Herod’s son was now in power in Judea, so Galilee was a safer place. To Matthew this was the fulfillment of ancient scripture spoken by prophets of old. This is all that Matthew will tell us of the child Jesus, until he appears again in the wilderness of Judea, to be baptized by John the Baptist. We will pick up this story once again next Sunday, on the Baptism of Our Lord.

So two weeks ago the first chapter of Matthew ended with the prophecy from Isaiah: “*Behold, the young maiden shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,*” with means “*God is with us*” ...and she bore a son, and named him Jesus” (which means “*savior*”). But it seems that God’s presence in the child Jesus did not bring peace to the earth, except, perhaps, on the night he was born. Within days his birth brought about great suffering and death through King Herod’s vengeance in Bethlehem. And the adult Jesus’ preaching and teaching in Galilee, Judea and Jerusalem about the peace of God’s kingdom and loving your neighbor seemed to only bring the response of violence, suffering and death to himself, his followers and all who believed in his words and lived them out. For the “*peace of Christ*” is a paradox: compassionate care for the neighbor who has been rejected, and the truth of God which exposes our sins and the lies of the powerful, that bring hatred, anger and vengeance in response. The innocence of Christmas is held in tension with its loss in death, as we feel it in our hearts when we remember the loved ones we have lost every Christmas day.

So this story of the violence brought on by Herod in response to Jesus’ birth, instead of peace, reminds us of the violence throughout history which continues to plague us all. In more recent years we have the slaughter of young people and children by gun violence at Sandy Hook Elementary school, at *The Pulse* nightclub, in the streets of Chicago and other U.S. cities, of police killed in Dallas, Philando Castille in St. Paul and other young, black men in America, senseless slaughter in Berlin, Brussels, and the many thousands of children and other

civilians in Aleppo, Syria – because of a president named Assad and a regime so focused on retaining power that they will stop at nothing to hold on to it. We are reminded of the hundreds of thousands of Syrian families who have fled the violence of civil war, risking death in the Mediterranean for the hope of survival and peace. For what parent would leave home and put their child in an overcrowded boat on the waters of the sea, unless the land, and home, were too dangerous?. This week we were reminded also of events of our troubling past in Minnesota, with the hanging of 38 Dakota men in Mankato on December 26 in 1862, for participating in a brief, violent war against the white Americans stealing their lands and taking away their way of life, and the slaughter of 300 children, women and men at Wounded Knee, South Dakota on December 29, 1890, the final incident in the American war against native, indigenous people.

Of course, this is a sad, and gory subject to share on this Sunday morning. We wish we could linger at the manger, and gaze upon the stars in the sky, and make believe that our carols are the songs of the angels. But the Christmas gospel does not stop with just the good news of Jesus' birth – Matthew continues to tell the truth of the “pushback” God's gift of a child received from the powers of evil and sin on earth. For the good news is that *Jesus is Emmanuel - God is with us* – and even if God cannot prevent the suffering that we inflict upon each other, Christ is present to bear it with us. Jesus is here to bring us healing and forgiveness, and to light a path through the darkness with love.

Without the reality of the pain and suffering that came along with Jesus' birth, the Christmas story would be no more satisfying than one of those Hallmark Christmas movies that may entertain us, but do not help us grow. We are encouraged by the innkeeper who scrounged up some space in his barn for Jesus when there was no room in the inn. We see the light in the warning of God's messenger – the angel who gave the wise men and Joseph enough warning to save the Holy Family and Jesus from those who wished to harm them. We see how the magi took the risk to deceive Herod and return directly home without telling him the location of the newborn king, that threat to his throne. They became part of the resistance to evil, as people of faith have been known to do throughout the centuries – against Pharaoh, against Emperors, Nazis, Communists, and slave owners. Even the people of Egypt received Jesus and the holy refugee family, which should inspire us to receive refugees and immigrants today.

So like they did in the Christmas gospel, we must find room in the world, our hearts today for the children and families today who flee warfare and violence in this world, whether in a foreign country, within our borders, or in our homes from domestic violence or abuse. We began as a church of the Redeemer when families left their homes in German 125 years ago to begin a new life here in St. Paul. This church received African American neighbors who left the world of Jim

Crow in the South to come north, we received refugees from Southeast Asian during the Vietnam War, and this past year we welcomed another family of immigrants from Sudan – Obang Agwa’s wife and children. We have welcomed families who are experiencing the need for emergency housing through Project Home for several years. And now we are contemplating a decision to open our doors to undocumented immigrants from many countries south of our borders, or others from different lands, who may face the risk of deportation and family separation. Can we open our hearts and our doors to our neighbors if needed, to ensure their safety and welcome in our community and state?

This may very well be the new test for the witness of our Christian Church: how we welcome and ensure the safety of children and families who must leave their homelands. It is the test of *agape* love, the unconditional love of God found in those who follow Jesus, and the willingness to take a risk as part of the resistance to hate, exclusion, suspicion and fear. Instead of building walls, arrest and deportation, will we open our arms, our hearts, and our doors with love? Will we receive the refugee or undocumented child as we would Jesus?

This new year of 2017 will give us countless opportunities to answer these questions, and to give our witness to our faith in Jesus Christ. Not only in the ways I have just shared, but also in the times when a friend or neighbor needs our forgiveness, our compassion or our help. For God has promised through Jesus Christ to be with us, and lead us through to the other side of death, to the life that endures forever. In this fallen world, there is nothing more hopeful than to hear the word of God who gives mercy, forgiveness, and an outstretched hand, to lead us out of the darkness, and into the light of life forever. Thanks be to God! Amen.