

Jan. 3 2021

Gospel reading: Matt. 2:13-23

13When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. “Get up,” he said, “take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.” **14**So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, **15**where he stayed until the death of Herod.

And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: “Out of Egypt I called my son.”

16When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.

17Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: **18** “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.”

19After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, **20**and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child’s life are dead.” **21**So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. **22**But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, **23**and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth.

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Last week was the First Sunday after Christmas, and the reading took me a little bit by surprise because it was not the one I was expecting. I was expecting the “The Slaughter of the Holy Innocents” (listed above) because in my mind that reading is always the First Sunday of Christmas. “Maybe I’m mistaken,” I thought. “Perhaps it’s the second Sunday.” I wasn’t going to preach on it in any case, so I didn’t give it much thought until THIS week, when it appeared to me to be a repeat of last Sunday’s text. (Actually there is a little overlap of about two verses.) My first thought was that I made a

mistake last week and printed the wrong text. But no. My next thought was that *Lutheran Service Builder* had a hiccup and repeated the lesson... or worse... deliberately skipped the “Slaughter of the Innocents” because it wasn’t politically correct or some such nonsense; but no, I got that wrong as well. I looked more closely at the readings and caught my mistake and, in the process, I learned that the commemoration of “The Slaughter of the Holy Innocents” is a feast day that may or may not be observed on a Sunday. Just like All Saints Day or Reformation Day, “the Slaughter of the Holy Innocents” is a set date, December 28.

I don’t usually pay attention to special feast days in the church. (Although the lectionary often places the feast day readings FIRST so I tend to use them for the Sunday services without really paying attention. It’s not all that important.) But I’m spending time on it because it caused me to RE-THINK skipping over the story of King Herod and his massacre of innocent children, specifically first-born males between the ages of newborn and two years old. I was happy to skip over such a grim tale at Christmas. Right in the middle of this joyful celebration of our dear Savior’s birth why would I want to remind you of this awful event? We have enough awfulness going on right now. Why add to it?

That is, until I got the uneasy impression that I was being subtly TOLD to avoid it and ignore it by a commission on liturgy that would be just as happy if every difficult text could be simply be buried in the book that “nobody reads” anyway. There has to be some statistic out there that they are using to suggest that most Christians only read the Bible when it’s read in church; I hope that’s not true. But if you are looking for a simple New Year’s resolution you could add reading through the New Testament this year to your list. In any case... There I was sitting on the thought that “someone” doesn’t want me to preach on this story and it was having the opposite effect on me.

There has to be SOME VALUE to this story that St. Matthew would include it in his Gospel narrative. And beside which, we have been focused on the Gospel of Matthew this year as we were IN Series “A.” Just as I don’t always pay attention to the feast days, likely some of you are not aware that we use a three-year lectionary. In Series A we read mostly from Matthew. In Series B we read mostly from Mark. In Series C it’s mostly from Luke. And John is sprinkled in here and there throughout the series. With Advent we began series B, but there is no “Christmas story” in Mark’s Gospel. We are most familiar with Luke’s version of the Christmas story. But Matthew tells us the Christmas story from a more Jewish perspective.

Here is why the story of the “slaughter of the innocent children” is important to know.

1. It fulfills a sort of prophecy, connecting the matriarch Rachel to the loss of her children. Weeping in time and in advance for her murdered children, in Bethlehem she is inconsolable at her loss. One of the most beautiful hymns in Christendom is the Coventry Carol. If I played some of it for you, you would no doubt recognize this

beautiful piece of music. But if you are like me, you will not know what the words of the carol sing of... but it is the song of the mothers in Bethlehem lamenting the deaths of their little boys. They are singing them a lullaby before they are to be put to death by the soldiers of the king. We forget how cruel the world can be. This song brings that cruelty home with a strong lamentation. There is purpose in our being made to look upon it and be shaken from our illusion of rainbow and unicorns.

2. The story is important because it connects us to similar stories in the Old Testament, where the birth and the arrival of Moses is also connected to the slaughter of God's people and again the first-born male child of each household was to be executed in order for a king to feel safe in his castle. Our Lord's own birth likewise follows in the pattern of deliverers and saviors of Israel.

Going back now to the reasons I had for wanting to avoid the story had everything to do with not wanting to deal with more sadness and disappointing news than we were already trying to deal with individually in our own lives. Maybe we could skip the "slaughter of the innocents" this year? And feeling like that was my choice... versus the feeling that I was being pushed to ignore the story by "the powers that be." In retrospect, I might just be reacting to the abuse of executive orders in the political arena and projecting that on to the commission on liturgy, because this story not included this year for other reasons that I'm not aware of because I don't really pay close attention to liturgics anyway. And maybe that this sermon preparation has more to do with confronting my own sinfulness and rebellion than it has to do with the motives of some nameless synodical commissioners.

And therein lies the preaching point. **Sometimes we don't want to look too closely at our own motives because they might show us things about ourselves that we don't want to look at, don't want to confront, and don't want to deal with.** And then a story like this comes along and tells us that we need to look.

Once upon a time I was working in my woodshop and I was pushing a small block of wood against a very dull blade on my router table. It was the second to last piece I needed to round over and I knew the blade was getting too dull to keep working but I was so close to being done that I was just going to push through the last two pieces when the block kicked out, and I ran my fingers into the spinning blade. BANG! I retracted my hand in an instant but as I grabbed my fingers, I knew that I had just done something really bad. I wasn't in any pain just yet; my fingers were numb. I expected that at any moment the blood would start dripping but so far nothing. I knew I was going to have to take a look. I knew it was going to be bad. I figured I might pass out so I called my son Aric to bring me some paper towels. Chris was not home. She wouldn't have handled it very well if there was a lot of blood. I tried to loosen the grip on my fingers but the ends of my fingers were sticking to the skin of my hand. Now I was scared. I did not want to look, because I did not want to see how badly I was damaged.

And that's the point of the story. Sometimes we just don't want to look inward at the problem spots because we don't want to see our damage and how bad it is. In my case I ran my hand under the water to try to get my hand free from my fingers without pulling the skin apart. I got a good look before the blood finally gushed out. It was bad but not too bad considering what I did. I gripped them again in the paper towel and Aric called Chris so that she could come home from her meeting and take me to the hospital. Over the years she's done that a few times for me. And I got repaired and, amazingly, there aren't even any bad scars from that one.

Being healed of our sins is what the Lord came into the world to do. And the world is damaged so badly that even little children suffer. That's hard to look at, hard to accept. But it is the nature of the world we live in. It is filled with losses, and sorrows, and damage and death. It is what it is, broken with sin and in need of our Savior.

Alleluia! Let us celebrate the birth of our Lord, the Savior who rescues from sin, from death and the power of the devil. Amen.