

12-29-19 SERMON CCI Matthew 2: 13-23 Let's Keep Herod in Christmas

This morning's scripture reading comes too soon. Too soon after celebrating Christmas with all its joy, music, gifts, and family and friends.

SLIDE Christmas Eve here was filled with the familiar scriptures about the birth of Christ, and we sang beloved Christmas hymns like "O Little Town of Bethlehem" and "Joy to the World." We heard about Joseph and his dream and young Mary giving birth to her firstborn child and laying him in a manger, of angels greeting the shepherds with words of peace on earth and good will to all. We even learned about how to swaddle a newborn and other lessons from the manger. Christmas Eve services are so beautiful and hope-filled, gentle and filled with soft candlelight.

SLIDE Which makes this morning's reading from Matthew so jarring. Couldn't we stay a little longer at the sweet little manger? Couldn't we travel with the shepherds to see the baby Jesus? Couldn't we spend more time watching the wise men with their camels and kingly clothing and their gifts? Instead, today we skip to scenes we would rather ignore:

SLIDE After the wise men brought Jesus their gifts and left for home, Herod discovered that they had tricked him and returned home by another route rather than coming back to tell him where the child was. In his fear and paranoia that this "newborn king of the Jews," would rob him of his throne and power, Herod decided to stop him. He ordered the slaughter of all boys in Bethlehem 2 years and younger. Why 2 years- because he remembered when the wise men had told him the new king would be born which was about 2 years earlier. And he ordered all boys 2 years and younger to be killed so he could be sure he killed the newborn king. But God was already at work. The angel of God told Joseph in a dream to take his family to Egypt. **SLIDE** So Joseph, Mary, and Jesus hurried to Egypt in the dark of night. Once more they traveled with no place to stay, no provisions for food, no health insurance, nothing.

I remember this story from Sunday School and how cool it was that God protected the holy family so that they escaped Herod's anger. And that God will care for us too. But no one talked about the women weeping back in Bethlehem. And no wonder. **SLIDE** Matthew's image of soldiers ripping infants from their mothers' arms and slaughtering them in front of them for

no other reason than Herod's jealousy and anger are jarring. So much helpless weeping. Can we hear the mothers and children crying? And how many fathers were killed trying to protect their families? How does a small town live through such a tragedy? Matthew calls to mind the words of the prophet Jeremiah:

“A voice is heard in **Ramah**, mourning and great **weeping**,
Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted,
because they are no more.”

In Jeremiah's day, Ramah was a place where the Babylonians deported the Jews to captivity, and Rachel was Israel weeping because Israel's people were gone. In Matthew's story Rachel weeping was the sound of the mothers weeping over their bleeding and dead sons and perhaps even their husbands. The grief and loss was overwhelming. Losing a child is hard enough; having them slaughtered in front of you is unimaginable. Watching them bleed to death helplessly. It's an ugly scene that tears at our souls.

Other than Matthew, there is no historical record of this slaughter of the boys of Bethlehem. And yet, with what we know historically about Herod, it is realistic. Herod was an insecure man in power who ordered the deaths of anyone who he distrusted, even family members. Herod is known for having one of his wives killed as well as three of his sons for treason. Even without historical evidence, it rings true with Herod's known character.

Even more, it rings true in the world we live in. **SLIDE** Who can forget Sandy Hook Elementary School in 2012 where 20 children and 6 adults were killed. In 2019 America has had 423 more mass shootings killing 466 people with a total of 2070 victims. **SLIDE** We still have unjust rulers and violent demonstrations of power. **5 SLIDES** Children continue to suffer and die. **2 SLIDES** And the sound of women weeping over their children can still be heard. Can we hear the crying?

Matthew reminds us that the horrors of today are not new. Herod was not the world's last corrupt leader. Which may be part of Matthew's point. Because we hear a lot about the need to keep Christ in Christmas. And I agree. Keeping our focus at Christmas on the birth of Christ as God-with-us is what brings real meaning to the season.

But if the only Christ we keep in Christmas is the baby in the manger, we haven't kept the whole Christ. Jesus has left the manger! The God-man Jesus faced the dangers we face today, he fought against injustice, and faced rejection by religious leaders. He finally died on the command of an unjust ruler. And people are dying because of unjust rulers today. So let's keep Christ in Christmas, but let's also keep Herod in Christmas. Keeping Herod in Christmas prevents us from leaving Jesus sweetly in the manger and forces us to let Jesus to be God-with-us in this very real and sometimes frightening, world. Keeping Herod in Christmas helps us not be blind to leaders today whose motives are suspect and who use their power to harm others.

SLIDE The story of Joseph, Mary and Jesus as refugees from the threat of Herod reminds us that God identifies with those who have been driven from their homes by the threat of danger, those who are displaced by violence and tragic weather, and those who, like the families in Bethlehem, suffer devastating loss in this life. **SLIDE** The Jesus who found refuge in Egypt grew up to be the One who offered refuge to those who suffer, who fed the hungry, cried at the graves of those who mourned, touched the people no one else would touch, welcomed women and children, mentally ill, and other outcasts of his day. This Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan that calls us to treat all people as our neighbors with mercy, to not turn away in their time of need. This Jesus taught us to love even our enemies, to turn the other cheek, to care for the sick, the poor, the widow and the orphan, and those in prison because whatever we do for them we have done for Jesus himself. And whatever we refuse to do for them we have refused to do for Jesus himself. Including those at our borders seeking refuge, a safe place to live and raise their children. **SLIDE** Sadly, is this what we have done to the Josephs and Marys seeking refuge today?

SLIDE Brothers and sisters, we are entering the new year 2020 in a few days. We have an election in the year ahead. Jesus didn't say anything about voting because people didn't have the privilege of voting in his day. He didn't say anything about which political party is his favorite. He didn't even say what form of government is the right one. But Jesus had a lot to say about how we treat one other. So as we listen to candidates and ideas, let's not listen as Democrats or Republicans, or even as Americans. Matthew's story

calls us to listen, instead, as followers of Jesus, the One who came to be God-with-us. Listen for whether policies and ideas reflect what's important to Jesus- caring for the sick, the poor, those seeking refuge, those who mourn, treating one another with respect. Listen as those who understand there are still Herods in power today.

The Mood of Christmas Howard Thurman

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
 To find the lost...
 To heal the broken...
 To feed the hungry...
 To release the prisoner...
 To rebuild the nations...
 To bring peace among people...
 To make music in the heart.

Let's let the work of Christmas begin.