

Sermon from Sunday, December 29th

Text: Matthew 2:13-23

All is not “calm and bright” in the continuing Christmas story. King Herod of Judea is threatened by this newborn king, Jesus. The wise men, employed by Herod to follow the star to the manger and find out the location of the baby, encounter Jesus and head home a different way. Meeting Jesus can change your path in life for good. They realized Herod’s evil motivations and said, “We’re out of here.” Herod, fearful of losing control of his puppet reign, orders all children under the age of two to be killed. This is known as the slaughtering of the innocents.

But God had special plans for Jesus. He is vulnerable and needs protection. We see the full humanity of Jesus on display here. Jesus’ human family will try to protect him. God calls on Joseph again, this time to keep the baby Jesus safe. In a dream, Joseph is warned of Herod’s plan to kill the innocents and is told to flee to Egypt. So, he and Mary and baby Jesus pack up in the middle of the night and go. Joseph, again, follows God’s plan. Imagine the faith he had to leave everything behind.

—Herbert Andersonn, former presiding Bishop of the ELCA says, “God had a plan, but Joseph had to act. Like Joseph, we must decide how to respond to what we perceive to be the plan of God. We must act. But that is seldom easy. And we will make wrong decisions. And so we need to experience again and again in the Eucharist the promise of forgiveness from God.”

Joseph was warned to flee, but what about all the families whose children were killed by Herod? Imagine the grief of losing a child. You would do anything to protect your children, even trade places with them if you could.

Imagine crossing borders out of fear of losing your family. Not too long ago we heard about children being separated from parents right here on America’s southern border. We saw difficult images on TV of detention centers, silver blankets on cold floors, children getting sick. I haven’t heard a lot lately since this immigration policy was

exposed by many who saw it as an injustice. Our conscience has been awakened to protect the innocents. Immigration policy is complicated, but I know God will work tirelessly through us humans and governments so that all may have life and have it abundantly.

In the year 2000, I visited the Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum in Israel on a Holy Land study tour. I will never forget seeing a pile of shoes of Jewish people who were the victims of the Holocaust in the concentration camps. Many of those shoes were children's. This image forever changed me to see the harsh realities of evil in this world. Now, I get very angry when I hear people talk unkindly about another group of people, or even individuals calling other's names. We have one humanity. The sins associated colonialism, patriarchy, and capitalism have derived the false idea that one race, gender, or ideology is superior to another. In God's eyes, all are equal. Physical borders are a human invention. Think of what happened to the Native Americans here in America. Lord help us to have eyes and ears to see injustice in our midst.

Quote from Elie Wiesel in his book "Night".

"We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere. When human lives are endangered, when human dignity is in jeopardy, national borders and sensitivities become irrelevant. Wherever men and women are persecuted because of their race, religion, or political views, that place must—at that moment—become the center of the universe"
—Elie Wiesel, *Night* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006).

These are very sobering texts. But as Lutherans, we always end with the Gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ. I think the good news comes in our Hebrews lesson for today. It talks about Jesus being the pioneer and perfecter of our salvation. He himself was fully human and he knows our suffering.

"¹⁴Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, ¹⁵and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death"
(Hebrews 2:14-15.)

Through Jesus life, death, and resurrection, we have been freed from the power of death and the fear of death. Yes, death will still happen in our world, but we now have hope because of the path Jesus took. Our baptism promises us this same journey from life to death.

“¹⁷Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, ¹⁸Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested” (Hebrews 2:17-18).

God downloaded all things human in Jesus Christ. Therefore, God does not abandon us in our suffering but journeys with us. God, who knows what it is like to be human holds us in loving care, and nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen!