

Matthew 2:13-23
The Other Side of Christmas

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. May the words of my mouth and the ears of our hearts be open to the Word of God this day. Amen.

Today I want to tell you about the Other Side of Christmas. Here we a day after Christmas and whatever group chose the readings for today has inserted this horrible story of King Herod's massacre of the baby boys of Bethlehem, the reading from Matthew's Gospel.

Matthew's version of the events of the first Christmas is quite different than that of St Luke's. Matthew begins with the confused and bewildered Joseph planning to ditch his newly pregnant fiancé. She is pregnant. Joseph doesn't sing, like Mary when he hears the news. He knows he isn't the father and so he has nothing to sing about. He believes that Mary has been unfaithful to him. Only Matthew's texts talk about how Joseph plans on how to get out of this marriage betrothal.

The Gospel of Matthew makes no mention of the census ordered by Caesar Augustus, the journey made by a heavily pregnant Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem, nothing about the lack of accommodation, no mention of the stable or a manger. Matthew doesn't reveal anything about the angels announcing the Savior's birth to shepherds or of the shepherds visiting the newborn child and singing praises to God on their way back to their flocks.

Matthew's story is quite different. There is nothing sweet and gentle about his Christmas story. He sets the birth of Jesus on the background of treachery and murder. He begins the chapter with, "In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem." (Matt 2:1). Immediately, those who read Matthew's Christmas story would have gasped in horror. IN THE TIME OF KING HEROD, OHHH! You see, Herod had a reputation for being a cruel and bloody king. It is well documented that Herod murdered his own wife, his three sons, his mother-in-law, his brothers-in-law (one he drowned at a pool party), his uncle, and whoever else posed a threat to his throne. Even on his deathbed, Herod plotted the murder of his son Antipater. In his will, Herod commanded that the leading men of the Jewish nation be rounded up and executed publicly at the time of his death, to ensure that even though most people would welcome Herod's death, there would still be mourning at the time of his funeral. Caesar Augustus once sneered that it would be safer to be a pig in Herod's pen than a son in Herod's house. Everyone recognized that Herod was a nasty piece of work.

The first readers must have gasped with horror when the wisemen turn up at Herod's palace in Jerusalem to ask, "Where is the child who has been born King of the Jews?" These early readers of this story knew the stories about this suspicious, vengeful Herod. He always suspected others were plotting against him and kills them, even when they weren't. And Herod doesn't disappoint us; he plots to get rid of this so-called King of the Jews. He asks the wisemen to report to him when they have found the baby. He pretends that he too would like to go and worship him. But, his first attempt to get rid of this newborn king fails when the wisemen are warned not to go back to him.

Herod would not rest. "He was infuriated and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men." (Matt 2:16). Now that would be every male child, because the Greek shows us the word for child here was in the masculine form. And Herod did not have to worry about any baby girls becoming King. Herod did have to worry about boys though and so he was thorough. No boy born in that region about the same age as Jesus would remain alive. They are all slaughtered, murdered, ripped from their mother's laps and hacked to death by a knife, sword, or club. In Matthew's story Bethlehem may be where Jesus was born but it is also remembered for the place where Herod's soldiers slaughtered babies and toddlers. This is not a place where, as our first carol says, "*Peace on earth and mercy mild*" but a place where the loud crying of parents is heard because their children, who had done nothing, were now dead and the one child that still exists is being carried out of the country to safety by Mary and Joseph. Matthew's Christmas pageant ends, not with tinsel-covered angels proclaiming good-will, but with Rachel weeping for her slaughtered children. (Rachel, the wife of Jacob, believed to be buried near Bethlehem, is seen as weeping for her descendants).

Matthew has placed the birth of Jesus right in the middle of the real world where rulers like Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot slaughter children for their own political ends. The baby Jesus has come into a world where children are killed by bombs, starvation, diseases and drugs. He has come into a world where many more babies than all the babies of Bethlehem are aborted, snuffed from existence everyday, others are brutally treated, abused and killed, and others are sold into prostitution or slavery. This is the real world, and it's into this world that Jesus Christ comes. It's into a world of pain and sorrow, of political intrigues and deceit, of murdered children, and people who are imprisoned, tortured, and executed; where uttering the simple creed "Jesus is Lord" is enough to sell your whole family into slavery.

The baby Jesus comes into our own personal world of death, grief, sorrow, helplessness, and suffering. Matthew wants to make it clear that Jesus wasn't born into a fairy-tale world where there is harmony and peace, happiness and angel choirs. We leave Herod out of the Christmas story – he doesn't fit with Santa and his jolly ho-ho-ho or with the baby Jesus in the sweet smelling hay. Matthew presents a story about Christmas that is far from the sanitized and often sentimental story that we are familiar with. Jesus came into a world that is far from perfect, in fact it is a very evil world. Jesus came into this real world where we live, and work and struggle, and work. He doesn't remain above the trouble of this world. Rather he enters into the fray as a baby, he becomes as vulnerable and helpless as the baby boys of Bethlehem.

All this gives us an idea of how magnificent the whole concept is that God became a human. There is so much wickedness and sin that the holy God could have refused to send us his Son. And it's only when we keep this context in the forefront that we can appreciate the stark reality of God's entry into the world. Jesus Christ comes to us, not into a picture perfect peaceful world of serenity and tranquility. No, Jesus Christ comes to us into the real world, a world of pain and death and suffering and evil. This is the world we all understand, in one way or another.

Matthew's version of the Christmas story has a lot to say to us as we encounter adversity, suffering, grief and death in our own lives. This may not be the Christmas story that we like but it's the other side of the Christmas story we need. Remember, it is Matthew who reminds us that Jesus is Immanuel, which means "God with us". We need to know that God is with us even when we feel that he is a million miles away. We need to know that God is right here with us when things are getting us down, when our sorrow is overwhelming, when death stares us in the face. We need to know that God will never consider us too sinful or too far away from him. This is a story about God's love that will do anything to be with us and help us when we need him the most.

Today we are celebrating the birth of our Lord as well as his gracious promise to be with us always in life and in death. We remember this day the children of Bethlehem and the children of every time and every place who are suffering. As Christ's disciples, as Children together in the family of God, we strive to make this world a better and happier place for the vulnerable and helpless. Jesus Christ walks with us in this violent, stark existence to suffer with us, walk with us and take us home. He is ready to be born into this low estate where nails and spears will pierce him through so that our sins could be born away on the cross.

In the suffering and pain of our lives and in the violence of our world, Jesus is Immanuel - God with us – for always. Let us Celebrate that gift this day of the other side of the Christmas Story.

Amen.

MAY THE PEACE AND GRACE OF GOD BE WITH YOU THIS DAY AND THROUGHOUT THE WEEK TO COME.