

Christmas 1, December 29, 2019 (Mt 2:13-23; Is 63:7-9; Ps 148)

Remember the Wise Men who followed a star from the East, looking for an infant king? The star led them to Jerusalem, where they asked King Herod for directions to this wondrous child. Herod was a bad choice. He wasn't a nice man in any case, and you can imagine he took a pretty dim view of this.

Herod had had three of his own sons killed out of jealousy and fear, and Matthew tells us he was already seeking to destroy this infant upstart who might take his place as King. Remember his instructions to the Wise Men: **when you find the child, send word to me so that I may also go and worship him.** But in a dream God warned the three travelers not to return to Herod, so they went home by another route.

Now we're up to today's gospel. **When the Wise Men had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. Get up, he said, take the child and his mother and flee to Egypt, and stay there till I tell you it's safe to come back, because Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.**

So Joseph took his little family that very night, and they lived in Egypt until the death of that awful King Herod. (Speaking of King Herod, there will be another one at the time of Jesus' death. Those Herods were bad news.)

But we haven't yet heard the worst of this King Herod. When he figured out that the Wise Men had betrayed him, he went into a rage. From what the Wise Men had said, he calculated that the baby he sought must be around two years old now—and **he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under.**

The Prophet Jeremiah had written about **Rachel weeping for her children in Ramah**. Ramah was a town about five miles north of Jerusalem. Rachel was the second wife of Jacob, son of Isaac, son of Abraham, and she died giving birth to her second son, Benjamin. Before her death, she wept for all the children she might have had, and she was inconsolable.

The Holy Family escaped the “slaughter of the innocents” because of Joseph’s dream. But how many little boys were killed because of Herod’s greed and jealousy?

*What is this gospel text doing here?* Christmas is supposed to be a happy time, and here we are, on the Sunday after Christmas, with biblical texts about an unbelievable atrocity. We like to hear about sweet baby Jesus, not the death of Rachel’s children.

What happened to *glory to God in the highest*? Jesus is just a toddler, and his story is filled with fury and murder, weeping and wailing, with the young family being forced to flee for their lives. It’s a far cry from *Away in a Manger* and *Silent Night*. Quite a comedown from the heavenly hosts speaking glad tidings of great joy to the shepherds, and to all people.

**A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children.**

If you’re a parent, I don’t think you can imagine any horror worse than the death of a child. Some of you’ve experienced that, I know, and I think we all fear it. We fear being helpless, unable to intervene when our children are threatened, or suffering.

But in the Bible, as in today's "real world," life after Christmas isn't all that sweet. The *peace on earth* sung by the angels in Luke's gospel is followed by death and destruction, suffering and evil, pain and grief.

Our world today is proof that despite the birth of the Messiah—God's chosen One—heaven on earth hasn't yet arrived. We're still surrounded by terrorism, wars, and rumors of wars.

We live in a world that wails and weeps as thousands die in earthquakes, floods, mudslides, fires. Such devastations used to be called *acts of God*, but now they're known as *natural disasters*.

We live in a world that wails and weeps as tens of thousands die in wars, local or large-scale; a world where acts of terrorism—often performed in the name of *religion*—decimate villages, bring down airplanes, and detonate bombs in schools and houses of worship.

We live in a world that wails and weeps as groups of three, or five, or twenty, or thirty people are gunned down by individuals who have no regard for life, neither their own nor that of others.

We live in a world where the effects of pain and suffering can be communicated instantaneously throughout the world, where live coverage shows people dying. And these horrors are re-created in movies, and gaming devices, and hand-held toys for children, so that generations of people in our western world have grown numb to the power of evil.

*Where is God in all this? God is with us, Emmanuel!* The birth of Christ doesn't remove the power of evil from our world, but his light gives us hope as we walk with all the "holy innocents" of past generations and of today.

**Jesus is God-with-us, Emmanuel.** He's the God who fled to Egypt when his own life was threatened, and he's present in all the Egypts and wilderness experiences of *our* lives.

**Jesus is God-with-us, Emmanuel.** He's the God who hungered and thirsted, laughed and grew frustrated and angry, and he's present when *we* experience those feelings.

**Jesus is God-with-us, Emmanuel.** He's the God who wept and sorrowed over the death of his friend Lazarus, and over the holy city of Jerusalem; and he's present when Rachel weeps for her children, and when *we* weep or grieve or fear.

**Jesus is God-with-us, Emmanuel.** He's the God who died on the cross, crying out, **Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do**, the God who promised, **I will be with you always**.

**Jesus is God-with-us, Emmanuel.** In his tenderness, mercy, and understanding, we can find *strength for our weakness, health for our illness, comfort for our grief, guidance for our journey* (Thurman, B&B, 72).

Thanks be to God!