

The Slaying of the Holy Innocents, Martyrs

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Matthew 2:

[13] Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there till I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him."

[14] And he rose and took the child and his mother by night, and departed to Egypt,

[15] and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt have I called my son."

[16] Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, was in a furious rage, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time which he had ascertained from the wise men.

[17] Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah:

[18] "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they were no more."

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Some of us born in colder climates were dreaming of a white Christmas, just like the ones we used to know. The whiteness of treetops glistening and children listening to hear sleigh bells in the snow. A white Christmas, to provide a nice, sharp contrast to the reds of the poinsettias and Santa's outfit.

Tomorrow's paraments would be red. White is the color for Christmas. But red is too! At least on candy canes and for tomorrow, December 28, is known as The Festival of The Holy Innocents, Martyrs. This day has been observed on Christian liturgical calendars since the 4th century. Our Gospel today recognizes it.

It is a part of a trilogy of festivals beginning December 26.

December 26 is The Festival of St. Stephen, Martyr, who was a martyr in both will and deed.

December 27 is The Festival of St. John, who was a martyr in will, but not in deed.

December 28 is The Festival of The Holy Innocents, Martyrs, who were martyrs in fact, but not in will.

Why does today's Gospel recognize such a day? Reading a gory account from Matthew about the slaughtering of innocent babies and the traumatic account of a family fleeing for their lives, as Joseph,

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Mary and Jesus had to do, when Jesus was about 2 years old?

Well, for one reason, the Gospel writer Matthew is interested in portraying Jesus as the New Moses. Matthew starts this portrayal at the beginning of his Gospel and continues it the whole way.

In our account today, as with the birth of Moses, there is a hostile ruler and Jewish infants are killed. At Moses' birth it was Pharaoh who was threatened with the multiplication of the Hebrews and who tried to stop it by killing all boy babies 2 years and under. Pharaoh, like Herod in today's Gospel, feared the loss of his power. And, in our account today, Jesus and his parents have to hide to survive, just as Moses had to be hidden to survive. And both hide in Egypt.

Later, in Matthew's Gospel, when Jesus delivers his Sermon on the Mount, he is the lawgiver declaring a new law from a mountain, even as Moses was the old law giver.

In our account today Jesus is in Egypt because of a dream that came to Joseph, his guardian. Moses was in Egypt because of a dream that came to Joseph, son of Jacob, whom his brothers dismissed as "this dreamer".

So, you see, this is one reason the Church Year includes December 28 with its emphasis from Matthew on Jesus as the New Moses, the one to lead the New Exodus, the One who will deliver his people from bondage and take them into the New Promised Land.

But I believe there is another reason we can point to for observing today as The Festival of The Holy Innocents, Martyrs.

The traumatic flight to Egypt to escape death and the gory account of the slaughtering of innocent babies say to us that Christmas is more than presents and trees and eggnog and dreams of a white Christmas.

Christmas is God taking the risk of coming into our cruel and senseless world with His Love.

It is God's willingness to run the great risk of our rejecting his loving overture and the risk of our trying to wipe his Son out of our lives, which is precisely what the world tried to do at Jesus' birth.

God comes into the real world to offer that real world a chance to make a colossal change in its way of thinking, acting and being - to make a complete reordering of priorities. And that is threatening as hell to a world hell-bent on maintaining the status quo - so, at his birth Jesus is a threat to the world and one of the world's political leaders tries to wipe him out. And, as God's great overture of love and a second chance to a senseless world grows and matures and teaches and heals, the grown Jesus is a continuing threat to the world and its blessed status quo. And, finally, the loving second chance succumbs to

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senseless slaughter and the world has its status quo intact.

But, as we know and believe, God did not stop there.

What the world tried to do to Jesus at his birth by slaughtering the Innocents and what the world finally succeeded in doing to him as an adult in crucifying him, God undid once and for all time in the Resurrection.

But between God's coming into our world in the flesh of Jesus and Jesus' own Resurrection, there is a life lived, a ministry engaged in, a vivid description given of what God's second chance lived out looks like.

And we need to remember that it is not all white snow and easy sledding. The coming of Jesus into this world is first and foremost a threat to this world and to the powers of this world.

The birth of Jesus was not as romantic as we sometimes would have it, either then or now. Then, babies were butchered at his Birth and later grown disciples brazenly and publicly tried to turn children away from Him.

Now, today, the Holy Innocents are the frightened children in Kabel, Mosel, Bagdad, Belfast and Bosnia, the starving children in Rwanda, the orphans in El Salvador and Moscow, the homeless and abused children here in Pasadena. The list can be expanded to include single mothers, often children themselves, struggling to feed their child, the mentally ill, the elderly - all who are innocent and neglected.¹ Try to do something about all this and really do it on a grand scale and you will discover very quickly that you are a threat to the economic powers of prosperous nations, yes, all of them.

Christmas is a time to celebrate Jesus' birth 2,000 years ago, but more urgently today in our hearts and in our actions. This Birth is not Currier and Ives romance. The Festival of The Holy Innocents, Martyrs, reminds us of that.

God takes a great risk in coming into our world to love us and to give us a second chance. But he does take it! And neither Herod nor you or I or all the demonic forces of the world can slay Him or be rid of Him.

God's taking such a great risk gives us permission to take some risks too. Every newspaper, magazine and television report describes children as victims of war, casualties of their parents, starving to sickness or to death, abused by pornographers, the victims of violence inflicted by those who should love them

¹Worship That Works, Sheryl A. Jujawa, 1997.

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the most of all. Children still have plenty of Herods to fear. We aid and abet those Herods when we fail to reach out to help these children.

As Dr. Sheryl Jujawa, director of the Episcopal Church USA's ministries with young people program puts it, "What can we do to insure their human dignity, assuage their fear, dry their tears? To stand with Rachel and the mourning parents of Herod's realm is to face the fact of suffering and evil in the world and to ask, where is God in all this?"

"This season of the incarnation invites us to take our place within the mystery of suffering and be transformed. It is not a matter of political opinion but of radical conversion. It is not about ideological posture but identification with the Christ who identified with the most vulnerable, marginal, disenfranchised ones - especially the poor and the children of the poor and all the children at risk everywhere."

"The Church is called to require of the larger society the just and careful nurturing of our children. The Church is called to be a fellowship of Marys and Josephs protecting the Christ who is among us as a helpless child."

"This is a day to remember those for whom the holidays are times of anguish. A day to remember those for whom family life is wounding. It is a day to consider our vocation to protect and nurture children. It is a day to revisit the sponsors' promises at baptism of children. It is a day that shows us God as refugee, as vulnerable and dependent for justice. Incarnation requires of us that we strive to build structures and institutions that protect the child."

"For the sake of the Christ and of his little ones, this day reminds us, we have work to do."²

Amen.

² Dr. Sheryl Kujawa, *Worship That Works*, 1997.

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