

Gracious God, open our ears that we may hear your truth, open our eyes that we may see your kingdom, and open our hearts and minds that we might know the cries of our brothers and sisters who are hungry, and hurting, and sometimes even dying without the knowledge of your love for them. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

It's the Sunday after Christmas. We've been on a journey together through Advent and we've been asking the question, "Are we there yet?" and my response has been, "not quite."

But now, the celebrations are complete (or in some cases they're just about finished). Some of you have already taken down the decorations and put them away until next year. We don't do that here at church because we are in the midst of the Christmas celebration. Today is the Fifth Day of Christmas... you know, the song about the five golden rings... and the Christmas Season begins on December 25 and extends through January 5th. So we continue to sing carols and look at the Chrismon tree while we wait for the wise men to arrive and recognize the child as the Messiah, Emmanuel, God with us.

When we follow the lectionary, the year that Matthew is the Gospel from which we draw our lessons, the Sunday after Christmas or the First Sunday of Christmas deals with what happens immediately after the Wise Men leave. So, in essence, we hear how the birth story ends before the story is complete with the Epiphany. As you will hear next week, Herod the King is disturbed by what the Wise Men are suggesting - that another king has been born - a king that will replace him. So he sends them away with instructions that they are to return to him after they locate the child so that he may go and honor him too. Well, as we will hear next week, the Wise Men are on to Herod and they return to their

homeland by another route... and that's where we picked up in the story this morning.

As we heard in our Gospel lesson, Herod goes into a rage at the deception of the Wise Men and he decides that the threat to his rule must be eliminated, but since no one knows who the child is, just that he is in (or around) Bethlehem, his order specifies that all male children in the area around Bethlehem are to be killed... just to be sure. But before the order could be carried out, Joseph is warned in a dream to flee with Mary and the baby to Egypt until conditions are more favorable... and they do just that. In the meantime, the soldiers arrive in Bethlehem and carry out the bloody deed as they have been ordered to do.

Now, I need to stop right here and acknowledge that this is probably not what you thought that you would be hearing on the Sunday after Christmas. I need to acknowledge that this isn't really what I want to be preaching about on the Sunday after Christmas. Don't we hear enough about refugees in our own time? Do we really need to hear that the family of our Lord and Savior became refugees so that the mission of his life could be fulfilled?

Herod was a delusional despot who obsessed over his own power and he made no bones about it. He also tolerated no threats or challenges to that power. He even executed his own sons when he came to believe that they threatened to overthrow him and take his throne. He was not someone to be toyed with.

You must understand something about Herod the Great before you can understand what caused him to kill all the baby boys in Bethlehem and the surrounding area. In the thousand years that lay between King David in Old Testament times and King Herod, no king of Israel wanted to be loved by his people more than Herod the Great. It was a consuming passion for him.

He played the political game with consummate skill. Although a member of the royal family by birth, Herod ruled at the pleasure of the Roman emperor, and his story includes intrigues with Anthony and Cleopatra and friendship with Octavius who later was called Caesar Augustus. Herod's task was to balance the needs and demands of Rome with the hopes and desires of his own people. The truth is that that was an impossible task. The vast majority of Jews in first century Palestine had no use whatsoever for any king, Jewish or otherwise, who collaborated with the despised Roman invaders. Herod himself was anathema to them.

But still, he tried. To his credit, he established something Israel had lacked since the days of King Solomon -- a harbor at a seaport city he built and called Caesarea. He built a royal palace, a theatre, and an amphitheatre and a good many fortresses in outlying areas. But the greatest tribute to his desire to win the love of his people was the rebuilding of the Temple at Jerusalem.

Though Herod himself was indifferent to his Jewish faith and heritage, he saw this as an opportunity to win his people over. He wanted this Temple to be more grand than Solomon's Temple, so that he might be thought of as a king more grand, more benevolent, than Solomon himself. Even the rabbis went on record as saying, in the words of one contemporary Jewish historian, "One who has not seen Herod's temple has not seen a beautiful building." Maybe, just maybe, Herod thought, the people will see me as their promised messiah.

But they didn't. And now here we are. Children murdered because of a perceived threat to an egomaniac. Understand that since Bethlehem was a small town, the number of children that would have been murdered was relatively small, perhaps no more than 30 or so at the worst. Yet, to the parents of these children and the members of the community involved, that is no consolation.

Consider how the communities around Columbine or Sandy Hook felt when those tragedies came to them?

So where does all of this leave us?

Perhaps we can find direction and hope in the prophecy as we turn once again in this season to the words of Isaiah, “and he (the messiah) became their savior in all their distress. It was no messenger or angel but his presence that saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.”

That’s a beautiful image in contrast with the image of horror that was heard and felt and experienced in that little town of Bethlehem. And that is why we remember what happened there when evil personified attacked and stole the innocence of that community. As painful as it is for us to hear this story, it is a story that we *need to hear*... it is a story that we *need to remember*. For surely it is a story that has been repeated throughout history. Within the last century, we’ve seen it repeated in the holocaust, in the genocides in Cambodia, in Darfur, and in Myanmar and other places where mankind’s capability to be inhumane to other human beings has been displayed in glorious living color.

But Herod died, as all despots eventually do. The holy family returned to Israel and out of an abundance of caution, they settled in Nazareth where the child grew in wisdom and stature and there prepared for the mission that lay before him.

His mission is now ours. As followers of Christ, with the light of Christ living in us, we are called to share that light and grace and love with everyone that we meet. And we are called to remember... as Howard Thurman writes in *The Mood of Christmas*, “we remember the little children... all the children of the world: those we know well and intimately; those whose stories have crept into

our minds through word of mouth or through devious ways - the hungry children, the destitute children, the starving, frightened, scarred bedraggled children; we bring quietly and sensitively before our minds and spirits, all children.”<sup>1</sup>

As we prepare to enter a new year in just a few days, the challenge before us is to be agents of light and change in a world that is chained in darkness. But we are not alone. With the incarnation, with the coming of Emmanuel, God with us in the person of Jesus Christ, we are called to live fully, to live aware, to live alive. Jesus says in John that he has come that we might have life and have it abundantly. The invitation is to live every moment. We are to live the good moments in celebration and joy; the difficult ones, in prayer and in confidence that we are not alone, but alive in suffering as well as in prosperity.

Jesus came not to offer us individual salvation, but to repair and restore the relationship with God that was lost with the fall. Part of that restoration involves repairing the relationships that we have with one another. Jesus gives us an idea what that looks like in Matthew 25. To live alive, Jesus says, is to live connected to those who hurt, to those who need, to those who have been pushed to the margins of our society. The invitation is to live outwardly, seeing all the people, and being present in ways that bring relief and bring hope. The invitation is to a commitment to live fully engaged, not turning away from brokenness or difficulty, from suffering or need, but ready to meet them where they are.

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<sup>1</sup> Thurman, Howard. *The Mood of Christmas*, 1985, Friends United Press, p. 133

Let me close with another selection from Howard Thurman's *The Mood of Christmas* entitled, The Work of Christmas:

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 brothers,  
To make music in the heart.

This is the work ahead of us. So, I ask you, are we there yet?

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.