

**The Second Sunday of Christmas  
January 5, 2020**

**In the name of the God of all creation;  
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus;  
And the power of God known in the Spirit.  
Amen.**

Well, today is the twelfth day of our Christmas season. New Year's is behind us ... The Feast of the Epiphany is tomorrow ... January 6 ... but this time between Christmas Day and Epiphany is the Church's liturgical Christmas season. The world would have us believe otherwise ... most of the Christmas decorations in stores are already gone in those post-Christmas sales. And some decoration certainly look like they need to be put away ... just look at the wreaths turning brown here in our sanctuary. That is what happens when you have Christmas Day on a Wednesday and our liturgical season stretches through two Sundays. I was in Target yesterday and they have already put out the Valentine candy displays!

So, a week and a half after Christmas we hear about those missing pieces of the nativity scene ... the Three Wise Men ... sages ... wisdom seekers ... Magi. However, the story we hear this morning is only part of the larger picture. I find it interesting that those who chose to include this story in our lectionary did not also include the verses that immediately followed the portion we just heard read ... an episode in the nativity story that is often referred to as the "Slaughter of the Innocents."

Some of you who read the New York Times may have seen an article a week ago about the Slaughter of the Innocents by a professor at Wheaton College. When I read it I thought it sounded a lot like a sermon I had preached just a year ago, so if some of this sounds familiar ... you know why.

The Church chose December 25 as the day to celebrate the birth of Jesus because ... with a little fudging of the calendar ... it was the darkest night of the year. The birth of Jesus brings light to the darkness ... and that light is for the whole world. That is why tomorrow is called Epiphany. The word is of Greek origin and means "manifestation" or "startling appearance." It is often used to speak of the dawn of a new day, and the manifestation of the divine ... in this case, with the visit of the non-Jewish Wise Men ... Magi. It is a narrative of the manifestation of Jesus ... the Holy Child of God ... to the world at large. It is the dawn of a new age. It is the light in the midst of darkness.

When the Magi showed up on Herod's doorstep they were looking for the infant child who was destined to be the "King of the Jews." Not surprisingly, Herod saw his power threatened and he sought to destroy the baby Jesus ... the text tell us that when Herod heard the Magi speak of the "child who has been born king of the Jews" that he ... Herod ... was "frightened."

Although the Magi had been ordered by Herod to report back to him about this child, after honoring the Holy Family with rich gifts these Wisdom Seekers were “warned by God in a dream” **NOT** to return to Herod. The Magi ... these Three Wise Persons ... went back to their home “by another way” ... another way that did not include reporting to Herod as he had commanded them to do.

In the very next verse of Matthew’s gospel the angel came back to Joseph in a dream. It was the same angel ... the angel Gabriel ... that had announced to Joseph that Mary was pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Only this time the angel warned Joseph to take Mary and the child ... Jesus ... and flee to the safety of Egypt, and therefore escape the wrath of Herod.

When Herod realized that the Magi had disobeyed his orders he was enraged. In his anger he ordered every male child two years or under living in the environs of Bethlehem be put to death. This is the portion of the story that is not included in this morning’s reading. The Church has a day set aside to commemorate the “Slaughter of the Innocents” ... December 28 ... but somehow we lose the continuity of the story when separated from the visit of the Magi. I assume that it was probably deemed too violent for Sunday family worship.

The story in Matthew, then, depicts Jesus as a refugee fleeing a nation marked by political violence. And though he avoids murder by Herod, he does not escape death by the state altogether. Three decades later, Pontius Pilate ... an official of the Roman Empire ... pronounces Jesus’ death sentence. Like Herod, Pilate does so to maintain power and remove a threat.

Today we live in a world in which political leaders are willing to sacrifice the lives of the innocent on the altar of power. We are forced to recall that this is a world with families on the run, where the weeping of mothers is often not enough to win mercy for their children. More than anything, the story of the “Slaughter of the Innocents” calls upon us to consider the moral cost of the perpetual battle for power in which the poor and marginalized tend to have the highest casualty rate.

There was the darkness of the world into which Jesus was born, and this is the darkness of the world into which Jesus would be born if he were to come back today. The tyrants of our world today are just as brutal as they were 2,000 years ago. Yet his light ... the light of God’s beloved Son ... shone in the darkness then, and it continues to shine today.

In his life and ministry Jesus taught of what he called the “Kingdom of God.” Jesus was calling the powerful to use their authority for the common good, not just their own benefit and security. Jesus believed all should have enough to eat, that everyone deserved shelter from the elements, that justice was based on what was “right” not on special interests, or how deep one’s pocket was. Jesus demanded equity, and he practiced equality. Of course a tyrant would be threatened, and the tyrants of today are still threatened by those who take seriously what Jesus took seriously.

Tyrants ... the dealers in darkness ... have names and faces, whether it be Herod or Pilate 2,000 years ago or Mohammed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia, Bashar al-Assad of Syria, Vladimir Putin of Russia, or Kim Jong-Un of North Korea in this millennium. Tyrants are bullies. Tyrants will hold nations hostage for their self-serving interests, and just to get their way. Tyrants manufacture their own truth. We know tyrants by the trail of destruction they leave behind.

However, some tyrants that provoke death-dealing fear have names, but do not have a face. In the midst of this worship this morning we will offer our prayers for the healing of those who are ill. Our prayer list is punctuated with the names of those who are a part of this community, and those known to the members of this congregation, who are struggling with injuries from tragic accidents, or are living with cancer, chronic breathing problems, addictions, deteriorating health, and life-threatening diseases. Right here in our midst this tyrant that brings darkness to our lives condemns innocents to a slaughter of what we sometimes call “natural causes,” yet the fear it engenders speaks to a power of darkness that permeates our world ... our own world in the community around us ... today.

So, how do we respond to these tyrannies? How do we choose to live with this darkness? How do we make sense out of these events which is so incomprehensible? Is there anything we can do to make a difference?

I would like to think that we might find some consolation in the teachings of Jesus. However, I believe that what we find is as much a challenge as it is a comfort. People around the world live under the darkness of oppression of one kind or another. Whether it be international terrorism, or domestic violence of a mass shooting, or the home-front intimidation of a deadly disease, it nonetheless provokes a tyranny of fear. Yet, in the midst of that fear there are those who respond with sincere compassion to those caught in its grasp. As you know well, the word “compassion” literally means to “suffer with.” Our consolation at times like this is in the shared pain we feel with those directly impacted by fear.

Jesus wept with those who grieved, just as we weep with those who suffer around the world, and in our own community. Each tear we shed is a prayer of shared pain with another who is living in the real suffering of loss, or fear, or illness. Shedding a tear may feel like one is living in darkness, yet I believe that when that tear is one of compassion it is a flicker of light to all our souls.

In this season of Christmas ... the Incarnation ... we are called to do no less than to take seriously what Jesus took seriously. In his teachings Jesus connected himself to those who were at the edge of society. He told the crowds to mourn for those who mourn. Grieve for those who have lost their sons and daughters, mothers and fathers, sister and brothers. Cry for those who no longer have a home, or food to eat, or clean water to drink. Shed a tear for those who have lost all means of providing support for a family. Open your hearts now, and forever more, to those who suffer from natural and human-caused tragedies ... the tyranny of fear. Be a light in another's darkness.

Let meekness and humility be your hallmark, taught Jesus. Refuse to make havoc in the name of liberation. Be peacemakers, taught Jesus. Refuse to make war as a so-called weapon of peace. Instead, said Jesus, be pure of heart. Act without guile, without greed. Be merciful, said Jesus who ate with the outcast of his society. For those that are weaker, poorer, simpler than you, demand a fair world. Seek equity and practice equality.

Finally, in the face of the tragedies of nature, and the tragedies of tyrants, when we feel most impotent to help those who suffer the most, when our world seems darkest, Jesus says to be still in your own heart. Be still in your own heart and the world around you will be still also. My faith is one that believes that when any of us are wounded, God feels the pain. God's heart is broken by the tragedies of this world ... we see that in the actions of God's son, Jesus. If we really believe that God came alive in Jesus, and God can come alive in us, then we are called to help heal the wound felt in the heart of God as we live into the gift God gave us in the Incarnation.

In a world beset by tyrants, tyrannies and tragedies we may be perplexed, and in our confusion we may often feel hopeless, frightened, and impotent. We suffer with those who are suffering the deepest. In that suffering we are all connected, one to another, as children of God. It gives us the opportunity to see this world as one unit ... God's world ... and the people suffering half way around the world as our brothers and sisters, just as are the people in our own backyard.

The Three Magi came to pay tribute to the new light in the darkness. This was the Epiphany ... the startling appearance and manifesting of the divine ... God's beloved son. Those Wisdom Seekers followed a star in the darkness and brought gifts. However, Jesus came into a world of darkness and tyranny. Jesus brought God into the world to transform that tyranny. The Epiphany ... this startling appearance ... is light in the darkness.

I close with a poem by the great African American author, philosopher, theologian, educator and civil rights leader Howard Thurman. It is called "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 have gone home  
When the shepherds are back with their flock  
That is when the work of Christmas begins  
To find the lost  
To heal the broken  
To feed the hungry  
To release the prisoners  
To rebuild the nations  
To bring peace to us all  
To make music in the heart.

Amen.