

“Angels and Kings”

a sermon by

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Texts: “When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all who were two years old or under, according to the time he had heard from the wise men.” (Matthew 2:16)

There are at least two sides of Christmas, the light side and the dark side, and each needs to be seen in relation to the other in order to understand what God has done in the birth of the Christ.

The light side of Christmas is the good tidings of great joy which shall be to all people. It is families gathering at home, young people returning from school and from work in other cities. It is the sharing, giving, and loving of this time of the year.

The dark side of Christmas is the world in which we live. It is the commercial conquest of the feast of faith. It is the business and social pressures that squeeze the time and energy out of us that we would have preferred to give to the Christ child. It is the despotic character of our mistakes and wrongdoings. It is the persistence of suffering, tragedy, cruelty and death that force us to weigh all the good news in balance. Sometimes we cannot help but long after a simpler Christmas, when it would have been easier to hear the angels sing.

I.

When the Gospel of Matthew speaks of the first Christmas, however, it speaks to us honestly about both sides of Christmas, as if to say, when the Word became flesh and dwelt among us it was not a sentimental affair.

Then, as now, there were two sides of Christmas: the light side and the dark side. The light side of Christmas is a child, born in a manger, shepherds and kings drawn to that place, angel choirs and gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

But Matthew urges us to read on, knowing that there is this dark side of Christmas as well.

“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 and under.”

That is the dark side of Christmas, which we must understand if we are to hear the angels sing.

The story of the “Slaughter of the Innocents” has about it the marks of a legend. The historian Josephus, who is our principal authority on Herod’s life, does not mention the story at all, though he does mention other atrocities that Herod committed. He had one of his own sons killed and he was certainly capable of great violence.

Matthew has introduced this story in to the infancy narratives of Jesus to remind us that the birth of Christ meant the death of other children.

No one knows how many children died in Bethlehem. It was a small town and may have had a population of a thousand people or less. Thus the number of male children under two might not have been more than twenty. But still, that is not much consolation for the mothers who lost a child.

Matthew sees in this story a link to the Old Testament. He quotes from Jeremiah 31:15, “A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children: she refused to be comforted because they were no more.”

Rachel was the mother of Joseph and Benjamin. She wept when Joseph was betrayed by his brothers and was sold into slavery. She wept again when Benjamin was taken as a hostage. She wept also when her people were taken into exile.

Rachel is a symbol of all mothers who weep at the loss of children, particularly at this season of the year.

Ramah was a city just north of Jerusalem, on the way to Bethlehem. But it could just as well be our broken world. There are places like Ramah all over our world in this country, but also in Darfur, and Baghdad, and Kabul and in all places where children suffer.

So, the angels did not have it all to themselves. The world in which the Christ child was born was not a soft and sentimental world. He had a very narrow escape in Bethlehem. Not only had the shepherds welcomed him, Herod was there as well.

So, what are we to make of this story of the “Slaughter of the Innocents?”

II.

For one thing, it is a reminder to us that the world in which Christ was born was a world very similar to ours. Some years ago I came across a remarkable book by Frederick Buechner entitled *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale*. It was one of those books that when you pick it up, it is hard to put down. It was only later that I learned that it was a

book on preaching, a series of lectures that Buechner had given as part of the Lyman Beecher series on preaching at Yale Divinity School. In this book, however, Buechner says something that has stayed with me through the years.

Buechner points out that the Gospel is bad news before it is good news. It is the news that we are all sinners and that all of us “have come short of the glory of God.”

In speaking of the tragedy that surrounds the human condition Buechner makes a reference to Shakespeare’s great tragedy, *King Lear*, which Buechner calls Shakespeare’s greatest preachment. In this play the wise are the foolish and the foolish are the wise. Foolish old Gloucester has his eyes put out and then suddenly for the first time sees the truth about himself and his sons. Mad old Lear loses his crown and his kingdom but at the last becomes for the first time truly a king. The villainy of the bad sisters is unmasked at last, and the purity of the good sister, Cordelia, now shines out in all its splendor.

But, then catastrophe occurs and in the last act, the good and the bad, the wise and the foolish, the weak and the strong, all die alike, and the stage is so littered with corpses that there is nobody much left except Edgar to stammer the curtain down as best he can. What he says is this:

“The weight of this sad time we must obey
Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say”

III.

There is something else in this story of the “Slaughter of the Innocents” that captures our attention in this Season of Advent. Matthew tells us that an angel warned Joseph that King Herod was trying to take the life of this Christ child. So the angel ordered Joseph to take the child and his mother to Egypt, where the family would be safe from Herod’s rage.

Again, the Gospel of Matthew draws imagery from the Old Testament. Just as Israel was called out of Egypt, so the Christ would be called out of Egypt as well.

There is today nothing more important for the church than the Christian witness that the last word in every situation is the grace of God. God’s grace is not only forgiveness and renewal, it is also, as Reinhold Niebuhr observed, “God’s providential working in history by which he makes the wrath of man to praise him and transmutes good out of evil.”

The story of the “Flight into Egypt” is one of the most powerful evidences of God’s providence in the New Testament.

You see, if only Herod had been able to stop the Christ as a child. The whole story would have ended there and then. But it did not end.

This Christ, born in a manger, spirited away to Egypt and then returning to Nazareth set the stage for the greatest story on earth. If only Herod had been able to succeed in his plan to kill this child.

Faith in God's providence is simply another aspect of the awareness that God is personal. The Christian witness in the world today is that God's grace is the last word in every human situation and that there is no situation in which God cannot be present and act.

St. Augustine in his book *The City of God* dealt with one of the most difficult questions that any of us can face: the question of why innocent people suffer. For Augustine, the question was raised acutely by the fall of the Roman Empire and the violence that followed the barbarian invasion in the Rome. For Augustine, Christians were not distinguished by what happened to them but by how they responded to these things. For Augustine, being a Christian does not exclude a person from suffering. Christians differ from other people, not in what happens to them, but in the fact that they can respond in faith, hope, and love.

IV.

Then, finally, the story of the "Slaughter of Innocents" bears witness to the power that "all things work together for good to those who love God and who are called according to his purposes."

You see, this was not the last encounter between God and a King named Herod. It was Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great, who tried to finish off what his father was not able to do. But ultimately he was not able to do so. For even at the end of the day on that "Good Friday" when Herod, and Pilate, and Caiaphas believed that they had finally put to rest the matter of this Jesus of Nazareth, they were not successful.

For on Easter Sunday the angel declared, "Why seek you the living among the dead? He is not here. He has risen."

In some ways this ancient story of the Slaughter of the Innocents prepares the way for the rest of the New Testament.

In his book *The Shaking of the Foundations* Paul Tillich speaks of the "Meaning of Providence." Tillich had encountered a paper written by the great scientist Albert Einstein in which Einstein challenged the faith in a personal God. Tillich had also encountered a group of soldiers who had fought in World War II and who questioned how anyone could affirm the Providence of God in light of the horrors of war. In both Einstein's treatise and the reactions of these soldiers Tillich found that the problem of providence has not so much to do with the idea of God, but rather the anguish of the human heart which can no longer stand the power of the demonic forces on earth.

The Apostle Paul understood these forces as well. He knew them all: the horror of death and the anxiety of life; the ambiguity of the present and the darkness of the future. Yet, in spite of all of these forces, the Apostle Paul affirmed that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ.

The Christian hope is not that everything will have a good end; there are many things that have a very bad end.

Providence means that there is a creative and saving possibility in every situation, which cannot be destroyed by any event. Providence means that the demonic and destructive forces within ourselves and our world can never have an unbreakable grip upon us.

Matthew does something very remarkable in this story of the Wise Men and of Herod's wrath. He points out that Jesus was born for the salvation of the gentiles as well as the Jews.

But Matthew also gives us a hint of what is yet to come. Christ would also face a Herod. But Herod would not destroy Christ. The God who delivered Christ from the certain death of Herod the Great also delivered Christ from Herod's son.

There is nothing more important for us to celebrate this Christmas than the power of a child born to be a king, a king who would overcome death itself.

Amen.