12.28.2025 Christmas 1 Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Isaiah 63:7-9; Psalm 148; Hebrews 2:10-18; Matthew 2:13-23

"His presence saves"

Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today is the commemoration of "The Holy Innocents," the children murdered by King Herod, who are remembered on the church calendar as martyrs. They were the first victims of what would become an open persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire during the first three centuries of the church.

If today's gospel reading makes you feel a bit uncomfortable, you are not alone. The murder of children, in any era, is an atrocity and there is no way to avoid this part of the Christmas story, yet we often avert our eyes from it because its reality is too real.

Our avoidance of this story can be seen in the kinds of Christmas cards we send and receive. The most popular image for religious Christmas cards is perhaps the scene of the baby Jesus in a manger surrounded by Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds. Perhaps the second most popular image is of the Magi shown led by a star or kneeling to worship Jesus. Yet I have never seen a Christmas card showing the story of the Holy Innocents. Religious Christmas cards, along with secular holiday greeting cards, of course, "accentuate the positive," with cheerful words about goodwill and happiness, along with warm greetings of peace, joy, and love.

Yet Christmas cards also don't include, for example, Mary's difficult words in the Magnificat: "*he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty*" (Lk. 1:52-53). Or Simeon's words to Mary when Jesus was presented in the temple, "*This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel and [he is] to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul, too*" (Lk. 2:34-35).

The story of the Holy Innocents and the flight of the Holy Family into Egypt is hard to harmonize with the gospel of Luke we heard on Christmas Eve. We heard of Jesus's birth in a stable in Bethlehem, and the announcement by heavenly messengers, saying, "*Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.*"

The angel's words, "*Do not be afraid*," remind us that the birth of a Savior is indeed good news in an often fearful, dark, and violent world. The words of Jeremiah quoted in today's gospel of a mother, Rachel, weeping for her children is at odds with popular greeting card images of Christmas.

Yet it is precisely here, if we pay attention to and struggle with the gospel story of Christmas, that we hear good news for today. Matthew's gospel is very realistic about the world in which we live – a world of empire, tyrannical leaders, the expendability of poor folks and vulnerable children – a world in need of a Messiah who offers God's justice and peace.

The Savior of the world is born as a vulnerable baby who, without God's intervention would not have survived. God intervened, sending the Magi home by another road and away from Herod. God spoke to Joseph in a dream and told him to take the child and Mary and flee to Egypt because Herod planned to kill the baby. Joseph was an obedient and faithful father who listened closely to God's voice speaking within him. When have you awakened at night to struggle with a problem or fear, bringing it before God in prayer? When have you awakened in the morning with an answer and courage to act upon it? Jesus, Emmanuel, is with you!

Perhaps you can understand Joseph, even if you have never been forced by life's circumstances to become a refugee, running from political oppression and violence. If nothing else, this story should teach us that the Holy Family experienced what so many people in this world continue to experience – being displaced for fear of political violence.

It is well-known by biblical scholars that though the murder of the Holy Innocents is nowhere recorded in ancient history, such a brutal act was entirely in keeping with Herod's personality. Jewish historian Josephus makes no mention of the murder of the children of Bethlehem, but he does record Herod's other brutal acts, the killing of two of his brothers-in-law, of his own wife Mariamne, and of two of his sons.

The Nativity narrative depicts with great realism a world under imperial rule. Caesar Augustus commanded the registration of all the world, and local rulers like Syrian governor Quirinius, participated; a fearful Herod killed small children, trying to prevent a successor from taking his throne; Roman troops occupied the entire Middle East; and towns were filled with the powerless poor, the hungry, and the sick. These images are the intentional focus of the gospel narrative, and the Messiah, Jesus, was born into this world and its systems of political and religious power. Born in our humanity, Jesus was eventually brought before Pilate, where he was beaten by Roman soldiers and crucified.

The good news of the gospel is more than a greeting card. Mary and Simeon's prophetic words about Jesus' birth – that God will scatter the proud and bring down the powerful – are to be read against our own world in which powerful leaders and nations continue to mistreat the weak and the poor. Mary's words about God lifting up the lowly, filling the hungry with good things, and sending the rich away empty, are good news to everyday people who continue to struggle to make ends meet, who often face discrimination and oppression, and who know

what it is like to be hungry.

The message of Christmas is good news of great joy for all people – not only for the rich and powerful, but for people like each of us that Jesus heals, breaks bread with, welcomes, and forgives. We rightly adore the babe in the manger, because we see God in the weakness of our humanity. This baby became the Jesus who fed the poor, freed the oppressed, and welcomed the stranger and the foreigner. Today, the powerful seek still to use him for their own ends, while continuing to bitterly oppose his good news of love for the poor and the oppressed.

Simeon's words to Mary haunt me – *"a sword will pierce your own soul, too*." As I think about Mary and Joseph and their flight into Egypt, like so many displaced families today, I imagine their hearts pierced with fear and uncertainty. Yet, as Isaiah writes today, "*it was no messenger or angel but his presence that saved them…*" God protected the Holy Family as refugees, leading them back from Egypt to a town called Nazareth. When has God's presence saved you? When in your need has God's presence led and protected you?

I invite you to think about how many families and children live displaced today, even in our own city. The sword that pierced Mary's heart is also meant to pierce our hearts as well. We cannot live in good conscience if the many families and children whom Jesus' loves, continue to suffer. We cannot live in good conscience as long as mothers, like Rachel, lament for their children and families. The sword that pierced Mary's heart is also meant to pierce ours, causing us to act with courage like Joseph – who heard God's voice speaking within him.

His presence saves. Jesus is born to dwell in your humanity, and his presence will save others through you.

This the work of Christmas. When the decorations are put away for another year, the work of Christmas begins. The work of Christmas is to live as light in a dark world. The work of Christmas is to live as a sign of peace. The work of Christmas is to love and welcome all people – as Jesus has loved and welcomed you.

The Christmas story is "*good news of great joy*." Jesus' presence saves.

Merry Christmas. He is born for you, and his presence will save many through you. Amen.