

Christmas 1 (A)
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Text: Matthew 2:13-23

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Our gospel reading for today tells a genuinely awful story. It's known as "the slaughter of the innocents." The cruelty and callousness displayed by King Herod seem almost unimaginable—except that people who had experienced how Herod exercised power could apparently imagine him doing exactly that sort of thing. He was a brutal, paranoid tyrant. Maybe, by setting this story right at the beginning of his account of Jesus' life and work, Matthew wants us to appreciate the sort of world Jesus lived in. It was a world where powerful people could do almost anything they wanted, and poor people were treated as though their lives had practically no value at all. It might make us wonder just how much things have really changed between then and now.

But Herod is not the only character in the story. In fact, Herod isn't even the most important character in this story. This is Jesus' story, and God is at work through Jesus to bring healing to the human family, to bring to birth a beautiful and life-giving alternative to Herod and his self-serving brutality. In this story, God's work is hidden and quiet. God acts through dreams that inspire Joseph to escape with his family, to preserve life and to provide safety for the vulnerable Christ child. Herod can rage and terrorize, but God is always one step ahead of him. I wonder whether we might hear the story as an invitation to be like Joseph, listening for how God might be nudging us to let our actions be a source of life and blessing.

The first thing I notice in this story about Herod and Joseph is how King Herod's actions are entirely about self-interest. He would do anything to ensure that his power remained unchallenged. Words like "selfish" or "self-centered" seem so completely inadequate for describing Herod's approach to life. Other people really don't seem to have mattered to him in any sort of way at all. For Herod, those other lives simply held no significance. Herod could hardly be more different from Joseph. Matthew has already told us that Joseph was the kind of man you could count on to do the right thing, even at great personal cost. But more important than that, Joseph was obedient to God. When the angel told Joseph to take Mary as his wife and to raise her child as his own, that's what Joseph did. And when an angel told Joseph to flee to Egypt to keep Mary and the baby safe, that's what Joseph did. Every step along the way, Joseph did what God was calling him to do, to serve not himself but to serve the life and wellbeing and future of the Christ child.

Our society would probably be shocked by how monstrous and cruel Herod was, but I worry that, in terms of primary values, our society has more in common with Herod than with Joseph. The people who are lionized by our culture—celebrities, wealthy people, powerful people—are

all about me, me, me and more, more, more. Too many of the politicians who get lots of press have made their reputation by attacking and savaging their opponents—and the truth is completely unimportant. Every day we are bombarded by messages telling us to always look out for our own interests and carefully tend every want and whim and desire. To be like Joseph, who doesn't put his own concerns first, means swimming against the stream, fighting the tide of culture. But just as God spoke to Joseph through dreams to keep him out of Herod's grasp, God continues to speak to God's people today—through worship, through the words of scripture, through prayer, through Christian community—so that we can see beyond our own egos. God continues to speak to us, inviting us to immerse ourselves in God's way of love so that our lives can serve God's purposes of life and blessing.

Another thing I notice is how fear plays a role in the story for both Herod and Joseph. Herod is afraid for his grip on power. Joseph is afraid of how the king wields that power. But what they do with that fear couldn't be more different. When Herod is afraid, everyone else should be afraid as well, because Herod lashes out with violence and creates victims. Joseph, on the other hand, allows fear to direct him toward caution, toward keeping Mary and Jesus safe. I was struck by the role of fear in the story because in our time fear seems to be a very potent force used by politicians to motivate or manipulate their followers. For example, how often have you heard that you should be afraid of crime, or afraid of people who will take away your freedom, or afraid of immigrants? There are movements in our country, such as Christian Nationalism, that feed on fear—fear of change, fear of people who are different, fear of losing an imagined past when America was a white, Christian country. Fear makes it easy to view others as enemies, and to hate them.

Part of what makes this complicated, though, is that there are times when fear is appropriate. For example, I wish there was a greater sense of urgency around the world in dealing with the causes of climate change. I wish there was a greater sense of urgency in our country around issues of justice and inequality. I wonder whether the challenge for us is not only discerning what genuinely warrants fear, but also acting on that fear in a way that looks more like Joseph and less like Herod—more appropriate caution and appropriate action, instead of creating victims because of our discomfort or panic.

There's one last thing I see in the story. As the story moves on, Herod dies. All of his cunning and cruelty, all of the suffering he causes, wind up being for nothing, because in the end he cannot continue to hold onto his crown. Death is the end for King Herod, and that won't change no matter how many victims, no matter how much terror and suffering he creates. But God's story continues—it continues as Jesus grows to adulthood and begins his work of teaching and healing. God's story continues in Jesus' way of compassion and forgiveness and humility and generosity. And even after Jesus' enemies conspire with the Roman governor to have Jesus put

to death on a cross, God's story continues in raising Jesus from the dead. God's story continues through the community in which Jesus is alive and present, the community that is the home for Jesus' ongoing work of love. God's story continues through the centuries now even to us.

When the story we tell with our lives is only all about us, then, when we die, that story is over. But when the story of our life is caught up in the story of Jesus and the story of God healing creation, and the story of God's love making all things new, then death is never the end of the story. Death is simply the part of the story that comes before resurrection and new life. When the story of our life is caught up in the story of Jesus, then, like Joseph, we are part of something so much greater and so much more beautiful than what we can even imagine, something that carries on beyond our own small place in time to be part of God's new creation.

So, people of God, as we look ahead at a new year, I wonder how God's quiet actions in the story, God's hidden movement in Joseph's life, might speak to us about how we can be part of what God is up to in 2023 and beyond. I believe God is already whispering in your heart and in your dreams, inviting you and calling you to be part of Jesus' story of love and healing and reconciliation. And I believe that God's Spirit is already moving through you, through your compassion and creativity and generosity to serve God's purposes of life and blessing and peace for all people. Thanks be to God. Amen.