

Slide 1 – Holy Family

The story of Jesus' birth and its consequences continue in the second chapter of Matthew where it states that Jesus, the eternal Son of the Father, is born "in the time of Herod". The birth of Jesus can be located in the time of a known ruler, but let us be clear, Jesus, the Son of God, enters into time on earth and begins to shape time moving forward. For Herod and others like him, they assume that time is determined by the power that they wield. But they are mistaken.

The Herods of this world are seldom as powerful as they think. In our story in Matthew, Herod is king only because it pleases the Roman Empire to have him rule over a troublesome region in the Middle East populated by people who are embroiled in their own conflicts. Herod is a pawn used by Rome to maintain order useful to Rome.

Jesus is born in an occupied land, a small outpost, on the edge of a mighty empire. Jesus is eventually killed under Rome's authority, and at the time his death will mean nothing to Rome. But we will see how God is working through all providing hope in a new age.

There are two stories in our short gospel text today. The first is of the flight of the Holy Family to Egypt. The family fled in fear of an order from Herod the Great. Herod, trying to show his power, built big buildings, but he also worked to protect his position. When he heard that a child had been born in his region who was to be king of the Jews, he reacted to keep himself in power. He made a plan to assassinate this potential rival. When he could not locate the one child, he ordered all infants two years old and under killed in and around Bethlehem.

Jesus escaped the plan of Herod when God spoke to Joseph, his foster father in a dream. The Holy Family resettled in Egypt for a time. When the time was right, the Lord appeared to Joseph again to direct him to the land of Israel and eventually settle in Galilee.

Slide 2 – Slaughter of Innocents

Scholars are not certain this gruesome order actually took place but they all agree that Herod had the means to order such a killing and the fear to do it. Fearing that whatever authority he had can never be secure, people like Herod know no limits when it comes to threats to their tenuous hold on power. But what is true is that Jesus was born into a world in which children and all vulnerable people are easily discounted, oppressed, displaced or killed to protect the power of tyrants. Jesus was born into a world where people are often at the whim of tyrants because the system favors it.

Such huge problems still exist. Some current statistics are telling. According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, in January 2019 there were 70.8 million people displaced worldwide with 37,000 people forced to flee their homes every day due to conflict or persecution. Imagine half of the population of Eau Claire fleeing their homes.

According to 'The Nation,' a weekly news magazine, 1 in 5 children live in a war zone, the highest rate in a generation. Children suffer growing up in a world hostile to childhood. They become victims in many ways, suffering death, injury, and recruitment into armed warfare. They are abducted, abused, denied humanitarian aid, and denied education. The scripture rings true, surely mothers were weeping. Today mothers and fathers weep for their children. When we do not shield ourselves from what is happening, we will weep for the children of the world, too.

Weeping will be a beginning sign that violence will not be the means that determines history.

The scripture says as Rachel was weeping for her children, she 'refused to be consoled' because they were no more. Another way to understand that is she 'wished not to be cheered up.' Here we are in the season of Christmas generously wishing blessings and good will to those we meet. But there are those who cannot be cheered up, because such wishes are not what they need.

Slide 3 – God with us

As we read through Matthew's gospel we will see what it means that God is with us in Jesus Christ. Jesus begins a movement by gathering a people who will follow in a way that challenges the world's impatient violence.

Jesus is born into time threatening the time of Herod and Rome. Jesus is king in the line of David, but he is a king who will redeem what it means to rule with grace and truth. In Jesus, God is present. In those who follow Jesus, God is present. When the presence of God is revealed in the birth of Jesus, it is met with a violent response from Herod. But God will demonstrate once again the limits of the powers of world leaders.

Some strains of this story are really old. Remember, if you will, how God worked through another Joseph, the great-grandson of Abraham and Sarah, who was following God's plan of restoring humankind and all creation back to Eden. This is a foundational story in the book of Genesis in the Old Testament. That Joseph led his family, God's chosen people, to refuge in Egypt long ago. For many years God's people found favor but then fear grew in the host country. The story was that there was not enough for the Egyptians and those who had found refuge in their country. More was demanded of God's people while their freedoms and favor were slowly whittled away. Finally, they had become total slaves to the King of Egypt and they were severely oppressed.

God raised up a new leader for that time, Moses, who led the God's people out of Egypt and freed them from their bondage. God showed that he was more powerful than Pharaoh, the King of Egypt.

In Jesus, God raises up God's own Son to lead God's people into freedom. The gospel story will tell of One, who the prophets foretold would suffer the worst the empire could do to him, execute him by crucifixion. But God raising this One from the dead exposes the limits of Roman power. In this manner, the gospel constructs an alternative world. The way of God resists imperial claims. The way of God refuses to recognize that the world has been ordered on these lines. The way of God offers an alternative understanding of the world and human existence centered on God with us in Jesus. God creates an alternative community that is shaped by divine love. (Warren Carter)

For the gospel of Matthew's original audience, to imaging the world in a different way meant to imagine it in a truly free way. They began to see that the world could be free from violence and free from the domination of the strong over the weak.

The world still comes at us in destructive ways. Walter Bruggemann reminds us "from out of the chaos comes this other voice rooted in memory. In our gathering today comes an alternative story that shapes time and our future not in hostility but in compassion, not in abandonment but in solidarity, not in isolation but in covenant." In Jesus, God stooped very low, entered into human life, took on all that we know and experience, and promised to be with us, forever. Knowing that Christ is with us, we will not be swallowed up by the griefs and sorrows of the world. That is more than good cheer, that's promise!