

ORDER OF SERVICE for Sunday, January 3, 2021
Second Sunday after Christmas
St. Martin's Episcopal Church, Lebanon, OR 97355
Bishop +John S. Thornton, Presiding

A Greeting

SH'MA YSRA'EL: Hear, O Israel: the LORD is our God, the LORD is One." (Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Leviticus 19:18)

Collect O God, who wonderfully created, and yet more wonderfully restored, the dignity of human nature: Grant that we may share the divine life of him who humbled himself to share our humanity, your Son Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

A reading from Ephesians 1:3-6,15-19a

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.

I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe.

- ❖ Hear what the spirit is saying to God's People
- ❖ Thanks be to God

Psalm 84

- 1 How dear to me is your dwelling, O LORD of hosts! *
My soul has a desire and longing for the courts of the LORD;
my heart and my flesh rejoice in the living God.
- 2 The sparrow has found her a house
and the swallow a nest where she may lay her young; *
by the side of your altars, O LORD of hosts,
my King and my God.
- 3 Happy are they who dwell in your house! *
they will always be praising you.
- 4 Happy are the people whose strength is in you! *
whose hearts are set on the pilgrims' way.

5 Those who go through the desolate valley will find it a place of springs, *
for the early rains have covered it with pools of water.
6 They will climb from height to height, *
and the God of gods will reveal himself in Zion.
7 LORD God of hosts, hear my prayer; *
hearken, O God of Jacob.
8 Behold our defender, O God; *
and look upon the face of your Anointed.
[9 For one day in your courts is better than a thousand in my own room, *
and to stand at the threshold of the house of my God
than to dwell in the tents of the wicked.
10 For the LORD God is both sun and shield; *
he will give grace and glory;
11 No good thing will the LORD withhold *
from those who walk with integrity.
12 O LORD of hosts, *
happy are they who put their trust in you!]

A reading from the Gospel according to Matthew 2:13-15,19-23

After the wise men had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son."

When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, "He will be called a Nazorean."

- ❖ Hear what the spirit is saying to God's People
- ❖ Thanks be to God

Homily: "Joseph, The Carpenter" – Bishop + John S. Thornton

Today's Gospel is Matthew 2: 13-15, 19-23. But what happened to verses 16,17 and 18? They're the story of Herod's order to slay all the male children in Bethlehem under the age of two. We've always called it "the slaughter of the innocents." The three astrologers who consulted with Herod had told him that a new king had been born in Bethlehem. Herod was so paranoid that even a kid in diapers was a threat to him. Kill all the little kids! Now, in Matthew's mind, the story is the fulfillment of a prophecy. However, in the minds of the

scholars who put the Lectionary together there was doubt that it ever happened. They were, probably, right. There is no historical record to confirm it, not in Josephus or anywhere. Call it a myth.

(Actually, that's good news, that all the little boys in Bethlehem weren't slaughtered. But it's not good news for all the Episcopal churches named "Holy Innocents." They'll have to disagree with that rendition of Matthew 2: 13-23 or just go on to more important things, like raising hell on behalf of the world's children.)

Raymond Brown, the eminent Roman Catholic scholar and author of *The Birth of the Messiah* says that, given the population of Bethlehem at the time and the infant mortality rate in those days, the number of little boys who were slaughtered couldn't have been more than twenty, if any at all. He doubts that there were any at all. However, over the centuries, the story has gotten mythologized and re-mythologized and re-mythologized way, way beyond twenty. The Byzantine liturgy sets the number at 14,000. The Syrian calendar of saints sets it at 64,000. In keeping with Revelation 14:1-5, some set the number at 144,000, equal to the number of "those who have not defiled themselves with women." Oops. We Christians have, at times, made ourselves nearly insane with our misogyny. If not insane, at least unjust. Repent. As for the number of little boys killed in Bethlehem, let's say it was zero.

Now....

Today's Gospel (John 2: 13-23, minus those three verses I just talked about) is what's called "the flight into Egypt." Whether Matthew intended it or not, it draws a stark contrast between two men, Herod and Joseph:

one a king, the other a carpenter;

one pursued by demons, the other visited by angels;

one who used power to subdue and destroy, the other to uphold the living;

one who was loathed by the Jews, the other giving no cause but to be beloved;

one whose name is kept in history's hell, the other, generation by generation, revered.

What a stark contrast between two human beings, one for whom it's hard to eke out a little charity, the other charity's very definition.

Between 37 BCE and 4 CE, Herod, by the grace of the Emperor Cassius, was "the King of the Jews." Though he had the Roman army to keep insurrection down, Herod had his adversaries: the Sadducees, the Jerusalem aristocracy, the Hasmoneans and Cleopatra (of Egypt).

The Sadducees were continually peeved by him, partly because he wasn't really a Jew. He

was an Idumean, half-Jewish. And he was a Roman stooge. Like many politicians, even those to this very day, he punished those who weren't loyal and rewarded those who were. To set an example for Sadducees, he had forty-five disloyal ones executed and took their property. The rest, if not already loyal, certainly learned to be, quickly too. Herod made it a matter of life or death. And no pardons.

In another contest of wills, Herod appointed his own man as high priest of the Temple. However, his mother-in-law did not approve and managed to get Herod's man out and her seventeen-year-old son in. It was a short high priesthood for that mother's boy. Herod had him drowned. His goons held him under water for eight minutes. It was, they said, an accident. Those things happen. Then Herod had his mother-in-law put in prison.

Wars intervened. Wars take a lot of time, cost a lot of money. But, for Herod, the victories (i.e., the slaughter) were satisfying. Finally, he was able to settle down to the humdrum work of kinging. To begin with, he had his wife Mariamne (either the first Mariamne or the second, I'm not sure which) and her brother-in-law executed. They had a scheme for succession. That's a death sentence – or just a slow dying in prison pit.

Actually, most of Herod's troubles were in his own household. He had ten wives, not all at once, just one at a time. Marriage to Herod was temporary and dangerous and, as I told you, fatal. His first wife was Doris, followed by Mariamne (the first one), followed by another Mariamne (the second one), followed by Malthace, followed by Cleopatra (of Jerusalem, not Egypt), followed by five more whose names didn't get into the history books. All were accorded the dignity of brood mares. So, Herod had sons and daughters all over the place, the sons in and out of his wills, depending on their behavior. It was never smart even to think about becoming the king. Herod could sniff that out. He had two of his sons, would-be kings, strangled to death. That's why it was always said that "it's better to be Herod's pig than Herod's son." To keep Kosher, he'd never kill a pig.

Though there's more, I've told you enough. I've also told you that I agree with the scholars who are convinced that there never was a "slaughter of the innocents." However, it wouldn't have been beneath Herod. No evil was beneath him. A defective person, he didn't know the difference between evil and good.

In that same country where a crazed king reigned, there was, in Nazareth of Galilee, a unknown carpenter named Joseph. He had recently married a sixteen-year-old girl named Mary. When Mary was twelve or thirteen, Joseph likely paid her father for the right to marry her when she was a little older. It was the common practice in those days. It still goes on. By the time Joseph took Mary into his house, she was pregnant. Whether she had been raped by a Roman soldier, as some scholars speculate, or Joseph impregnated her, as others speculate, nobody will ever know for sure. I suppose there are millions of dissertations about that mystery; and even the most serious would be, at best, guesswork. But everybody knows where babies come from. When we talk about the Virgin Birth, we're not talking about gynecology; we're talking about theology. To get it straight, humanly and divinely, read the Prologue to John's Gospel. Otherwise, why don't we just say that Mary had a baby and leave it at that?

So Joseph, whether the biological father, or, otherwise, the legal father became that baby boy's protector, his provider, his, I can image, his joy. And to make sure that he would be safe, he took the child and his mother to Egypt, until that madman Herod was dead. It's all believable, even if it can't be proved by ancient texts. Jews in Palestine did that all the time. During times of drought or famine or war or the craziness of kings, Jews went down to Egypt. Some stayed a while, others just stayed. Maybe Joseph and Mary and the baby went only so far as Gaza or all the way down to the Jewish center in Leontopolis, in Egypt proper. In the case of Joseph's little family, they stayed until they learned that Herod was dead and in a sepulcher – May God be praised!

In 2014, I published a short story called “The Fathering of God.” I had actually written it in the mid-1980s. It's about Joseph. My argument, made novelistically, is that Joseph was, for Jesus, the model of manhood, in fact the model of Godhood. Of course, Jesus was formed by the Holy Spirit, however that happens; of course, he was formed by Scripture; and, of course, he was formed, primarily, by his mother and his father. In Jesus' case, it was such a salutary formation.

Here's how I ended that story.

“Joseph became a hero to his wife and children...and relatives...and friends...and practically everyone who ever met him. He would have died for them, he loved them so much.

Finally, he did. He died. Joseph died. It was shortly before noon, on a Wednesday.

Mary wept and wept and wept. It was if the Sun, Moon and stars had fallen out of the sky. It was the darkest day of her life and nobody could give her light.

The kids tried to be brave. But how can you be brave when bravery dies?

It was Mary's oldest child, her son Josh (Jesus), who finally stopped the flood of tears. 'You know, Mom,' he said, 'Dad always made me want to be like God.'

The words came through the pain like a baby at birth.”

Now here we are, you and I, each day at birth, each day aborning.

As we think charitably...

and listen charitably...

.and speak charitably...

and act charitably...

charity will take our flesh,

as it, we can believe, took the flesh of Joseph, the carpenter, the father of him who was the flesh of the One Eternal. **Amen.**

The Creed: "Jesus Christ is the visible image of the invisible God"

Litany and Prayers

Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy Name,
thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
and the power, and the glory,
for ever and ever. **Amen.**

Prayer for St. Martin's

God of Love, open our eyes and ears to perceive you at work in creation, the church, and our parish. Fill our hearts with your love that we may reach out in love to others. Stir up our imagination with your Holy Spirit that we may find new ways to live into life with you. Give us a vision of your mission that we may share your love and your spirit in all the places where we work and play and worship you. In Jesus' holy name, **Amen.**

Seasonal Blessings

The Peace

The Dismissal