

The Second Sunday After Christmas Year A
Matthew 2:13-15,19-23
St. Paul's Episcopal Church
The Rev. Adam Pierce

I said last week that the world had already moved on from Christmas just four days after December 25th. Now some of us may find ourselves today on January 5th wondering why the church is still celebrating Christmas. But today is the 2nd Sunday after Christmas and it is in fact the last day of the Church's 12 day celebration of the Incarnation.

However those of us who came to church today looking for an uplifting message will have to wait. Because, while not denying the hope we have in Jesus Christ, today's sermon might not make us feel "good". After another church shooting in Texas and violent attacks against Jewish Communities in recent weeks we are left wondering why? There is much wrong with the world we find ourselves in today, but as we hear from our gospel text, there was much wrong and much violence in the world Jesus was born into as well.

Today's reading from Matthew has an angel warning Joseph of the threat to the life of the Child that Mary just delivered. King Herod has heard of the birth of this savior and responds with violence.

Our reading today jumps over it, but Matthew goes on in verses 16-18 to tell how Herod had each male child 2 years old or younger killed in and around Bethlehem; this was Herod's attempt to secure his reign as King. It seems Herod was someone who went to any length to secure his reign, even killing his own sons.

There are of course some questions that come up for us when we hear this account from Matthew. The first question might be: Why did God allow the other children to die? And perhaps the harder question still: Did Jesus' birth rise from the death of these other children as a sign of hope or did his birth bring about the death of the innocent?

It seems that like today, the world Jesus was born into was a violent, unforgiving world. And so here we are in the season of Christmas, a time of Joy and celebration, contrasted with the realities of a world that at times is violent and unforgiving; these realities not even the Bible glosses over.

Violence is part of the world; and too often violence is committed against those most vulnerable. In the story Matthew tells, it is against children. In recent weeks in our time there have been attacks on Orthodox Jewish Communities; there has been another shooting in a church in Texas that resulted in the death of three people. In Wilmington in recent weeks St. Andrew's AME Zion Church received a threatening, hateful letter filled with racist language. This is all in the last several weeks and each of us can recall many more acts of violence than these. Perhaps we remember any of the 41 mass shootings in 2019 by conservative estimates or as high as 416.

Suffering and pain are real in this world; even Matthew knew that when he wrote about the birth of our savior. And yet people often point to acts of violence and pain and are quick to say,

“There is no God!” Or we find ourselves wondering aloud how God could allow such things to happen. But we see in our Gospel text today that God was in fact born into this very world. Peter Gomes says it bluntly: God was not born into a fairy tale.¹

Suffering and pain are real in this world; early Christians understood this. Suffering is not an exception to our lives. It seems it is our lives and it does not come to us despite our faith, but rather because of it, just ask those Christians in White Settlement Texas or those here in Wilmington at St. Andrew’s AME Zion Church. As well as all those other faith communities that have experienced violence because of their faith. We are not immune to it through our baptism. It seems that our baptism should open our eyes to reality of the world around us. It was the world around us that drove us to baptism that invited us to look at the world and ask, “There must be more than this?”

So before any of us jump to conclusions about what ought to be done let us at least consider the disturbing and terrifying nature of the argument for the need for guns in church. It may be a world that Jesus knew, but it is certainly not the world he came to create. He came rather to redeem such a world ought to destroy such a world where such a thing as guns in houses of worship and schools were needed for protection.

There is hope, sisters and brothers, yet that hope is tempered by the fact throughout history there has been violence and. Yet this is precisely the nature of this world that Jesus comes to redeem.

Our great hope is that Jesus is with us in and through suffering. In our darkest hours or moments of our greatest fears Jesus is with us not to take us around these things, but rather to see us through them.

We have in our worship space the Christus Rex here behind me. This is something I’ve pointed to on a number of occasions as a symbol that can be misleading. We can be lead down the path of fairy tales when we look at such a symbol to believe that Jesus is victorious over death and therefore because of our faith in Jesus suffering will not come to us. But if we look closer at this symbol we see the marks of the nails in his hands and in his feet. This is to remind all of us that the only way out of suffering is through it. Jesus was born into this world and suffered in this world. And that sisters and brothers is our hope. In our pain, fear, and suffering, God is with us.

What Jesus has defeated by his death and resurrection is the fear of death. By his resurrection which we are all heirs of, we see that there is nothing to fear in death. It is not that we will never die or suffer, we will and we do, but Jesus shows us, God with us, shows us that there is nothing to fear in death.

In this news we ought to rejoice because it is that fear that causes so much suffering. We are told earlier in Matthew’s gospel that Herod kills the children because he was afraid of what Jesus’ birth means to his earthly reign. Racism and acts of hatred are rooted in fear of those that are different than us, those that represent a threat to our fragile self-created standing in the world. Fear is what causes violence and it is fear of death that leads to more and more violence. Christ came so that we might not be afraid, Christ came so that we can see in this world the hope of that

¹ Gomes, Peter J. *“The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart.”* P. 220

truth that God is with us in our lives in our suffering in our pain to see us through those things. Sisters and brothers pain and suffering cannot be avoided, let us not cling to such a false hope, but rather let us profess during this season of Incarnation, of the Word made flesh and dwelling among us, to live and die as one of us that death's grip on our lives, that fear that leads to violence, has been destroyed by Jesus. Let us profess the power of our faith through our words and actions in a world that lives in fear. Let us with confidence and courage proclaim our faith in the name that is above all names. Sisters and brothers, do not be afraid, it is good news that has come to us. *Amen.*