

Sunday, December 28, 2025

Feast of the Holy Innocents, Martyrs

Matthew 2:13-18

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, amen.

"Thus says the Lord: 'A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more.'" (Jeremiah 31:15)

My dear friends,

The feast of the Holy Innocents feels **jarring** in the middle of Christmas.

During Christmas, we want warmth, light, and joy.

We want everything upbeat, comfortable, and fuzzy.

Instead, we hear of rage, slaughter, and inconsolable weeping.

But this is not a mistake or an interruption.

This shows us the real world that Jesus was born into.

Christmas is not an escape from the world.

It is God entering our world to save it.

As Luther said,

"A theologian of the cross calls a thing what it actually is."

Today's text refuses to pretend that everything is fine.

This violent Christmas account

points us to the reality of the world we live in.

And it points us to the Christ who bears what is 'not fine.'

It points us to Jesus.

Jesus came to save the world by His own death on the cross

"at the hands of violent men."

Jesus was born into the real world.

And the real world is not neutral.

Jesus came fragile and helpless into a world full of tragedy and injustice.

He came to bear the full weight of that tragedy and injustice.

And by that suffering, He has won for us a new world of justice and peace.

We have come to the cross in Christmas.

I.

My friends,

Herod's violence is not symbolic or exaggerated.
 It is brutal, unjust, and horrifying.
 It is inexcusably wrong.
 There is nothing that can make it right or okay.

*Rachel is weeping for her children;
 she refuses to be comforted,
 because they are no more.*

God does not explain away this suffering.

He doesn't give platitudes.
 Moral cliches will not bring her children back.
 He doesn't tell this symbolic mother of Israel
 that 'everything happens for a reason.'
 What help would that be?
 Reason or no reason, they are **gone**.
 He just comes to her in her grief.
 He promises to restore the unrestorable.
 What is no more will be more again.
 God's promise of restoration through Christ
 gives us hope in our suffering.
*"There is hope for your future,
 declares the Lord,
 and your children shall come back..."* (Jeremiah 31:17)

This is the honesty of the theology of the cross.

Evil is evil.
 Death is an enemy.
 Grief is real.
 Suffering is truly terrible.
 But God enters that grief.
 Agony is where God is found.
 We are not alone.
 God enters our suffering and bears it Himself on the cross.
 Restoration and resurrection are won through agony and death.
 Christ's victory assures us of ultimate hope and triumph over evil.

We do not deny the brokenness of the world.

We do not deny our **own** brokenness.

We call it as it is.

We confess it.

And we find relief for our suffering in Christ's suffering.

For, "*Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows.*" (Isaiah 53:4a)

We often want a Christmas that hides suffering.

But that is not the world we live in.

That is not the world Christ came to save.

If we ignore suffering and wrong, we will ignore the Christ who suffers for us.

We need to be honest about our own struggles.

God's power is made perfect in weakness.

Likewise, we can't ignore others' brokenness.

A wound won't be mended by pretending it isn't there.

God calls us to be active in our faith.

Reach out to those who are hurting.

Help bear their burdens.

Pray for those in pain.

Offer a helping hand to those in distress.

Bring Christ's Christmas love into the hurt.

II.

My friends,

Herod's violence is not random.

These children are killed for one reason.

Christ has been born.

Herod hears of a King he cannot control.

A King not like him.

A King sent by God.

So Herod rages.

He doesn't want to bow to a greater King.
 He strikes where he can.
 He sends soldiers to Bethlehem.
 All boys two years old and under are killed.

This is how the world responds to Christ.

The world is not neutral.
 The world is hostile.
 Herod reveals the cruelty of sinful men.
 His actions display the world's hatred of Christ.
 Jesus said,
*"the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence,
 and the violent take it by force."* (Matthew 11:12).
 The devil and his demons wage war against the Church.
*"Be sober-minded;
 be watchful.
 Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion,
 seeking someone to devour."* (1 Peter 5:8).

The Church calls these children *martyrs*.

Not because they chose suffering.
 Not because they confessed with their mouths.
 But because they died *on account of Christ*.

They died because He was there.

They died because the Light had entered the darkness.
 They died because the world hated Jesus.

Rachel weeps for her children.

And the Church weeps with her.
 We do not explain this away.
 We do not call it good.

But we do confess this:

These children were not lost.
 They were claimed by Christ.
 They died for the One who would later die for them.
 The blood spilled in Bethlehem points forward to the blood spilled at
 Calvary.

In Revelation, we see the end.

The Lamb stands victorious.
 His redeemed stand with Him.
 His name is written on their foreheads.
 Rachel ceases her weeping.
 She sings with today's Psalmist:
*"He has delivered me from every trouble,
 and my eye has looked in triumph on my enemies."* (Psalm 54:7)

The world sees only victims.

God sees saints.
 Victorious saints.
*"For though we live in the world,
 we do not wage war as the world does.
 The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world.
 On the contrary,
 they have divine power to demolish strongholds."* (2 Corinthians 10:3–4)

The Church suffers violence.

But the Church overcomes by the Gospel of peace.
 Revelation 12 says of the Church triumphant:
*"They have conquered [Satan]
 by the blood of the Lamb
 and by the word of their testimony,
 for they loved not their lives even unto death."* (Revelation 12:11)

Herod's sword could end their lives.

It could not take them from Christ.
*"Precious in the sight of the Lord
 is the death of His saints."* (Psalm 116:15)

They belong to the Lamb.

And the Lamb never loses His own.

III.

My friends,

Jesus escaped Herod's sword.
The angel sends Joseph and the family to Egypt.
The Child is spared—for now.

But Christ does not escape suffering.

*"Nails, spear shall pierce Him through,
The cross be borne for me, for you;
Hail, hail the Word made flesh,
The babe, the son of Mary!"*

This Child was born to die.

Not in a palace.
Not with honour.
But rejected and condemned.

The soldiers miss Him in Bethlehem.

But nails will not miss Him in Jerusalem.

Jesus grew up in **our** broken world.

A world that hates the truth.
A world that fears losing power.
A world where everyone wants to be their own king.

And so, that world turns on Him.

Jesus does not run.

He does not call down angels.
He does not save Himself.

Jesus is crowned with thorns.

He is nailed to wood.
He is pierced by a spear.

This is weakness.

This is suffering.

This is shame.

This is how God saves.

Here is the theology of the cross.

God's power is hidden in weakness.

God's glory is concealed in shame.

God's victory is masked in defeat.

The Innocents died by another man's cruelty.

Jesus dies by the cruelty of all.

By Herod.

By Pilate.

By soldiers.

By you and me.

Jesus bears the sin that fills this world.

He bears the violence.

He bears the grief.

He bears death itself.

Jesus does not conquer evil by avoiding it.

He conquers evil by bearing it.

The prophet Isaiah saw His suffering.

He wrote:

"Out of the anguish of His soul

He shall see and be satisfied;

by His knowledge shall the righteous one,

my servant,

make many to be accounted righteous,

and He shall bear their iniquities." (Isaiah 53:11)

The truly Innocent One becomes the true martyr.
 His blood speaks a better word than violence and vengeance.
 His blood speaks forgiveness.
 His blood pleads mercy and grace for sinners.
 His blood speaks reconciliation.
And by His wounds we are healed.

Death took Jesus.
 But it could not keep Him.

He rises.
 The grave is emptied.
 The verdict is reversed.

Because Jesus lives, death no longer has the final say.
 Because He lives, suffering is not the end.

He who bore the cross now bears His people.
 He who died now reigns.

And He will bring every tear to an end.

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My friends,
 Christmas does not avoid the darkness.
 Christmas faces the darkness.
 It shines Christ into it.
 And calls the darkness what it is.

The Holy Innocents remind us that:
 God takes human life seriously.
 God takes suffering seriously.
 God takes evil seriously.

Therefore, be assured, God takes your suffering seriously.

You are seen and loved by God,
 who is present with you in every moment of your life.
 God doesn't flinch away from your problems.

You are not abandoned by God.

In suffering, we rarely ever learn "Why God, Why?"

But in our suffering, we learn the answer to the question "God, where are You?"

He is with you, bearing you and your suffering.

We find God's presence in that very anguish,
 rooted in Christ's suffering on the cross.

Because Christ entered our broken world,
 because He died and rose again,
 our tears will not have the last word.

We follow the Lamb wherever He goes.

For we are confident that He will bring our weeping to an end.

By His wounds we are healed.

The world is as broken as Scripture says it is.

But Christ is as victorious as He promises to be.

Jesus was born into the real world.

A world full of tragedy and injustice.

He entered this world to bear the full weight of calamity and evil.

And by doing so, He won for us the joyous new heaven and earth.

"So bring Him incense, gold, and myrrh;

Come, peasant & king, to own Him.

The King of kings salvation brings;

Let loving hearts enthrone Him.

Raise, raise the song on high,

The virgin sings her lullaby;

Joy, joy, for Christ is born,

The babe, the son of Mary!" (LSB 370)

*The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord,
 amen.*