

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹⁶Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, was in a furious rage, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time which he had ascertained from the wise men.(Matthew 2:16, RSV)

How suddenly the mood of Christmas changes! On Christmas Eve and Christmas Morning, I was happy. We all were. But now we have a solemn story before us. This world is tough, and in this story of the Slaughter of the Innocents, the Bible quickly gets to that toughness. In this story, we see that our world is very much in need of the Saviour. Also we see that you and I can make this world at least somewhat better by obeying the Word of the Lord, for in the end, you and I are Joseph: the Lord has entrusted people to us, and has given us commandments about how to take care of them. It is important that we renew our life of obedience.

In the early days of the Church, when the Holy Spirit was moving so very powerfully that even the passing shadow of St. Peter was a comfort and help to the sick in the streets, the apostolic opponents forbade that there should be any more preaching of Jesus Christ:

²⁷And when [the soldiers] had brought them, they set them before the council: and the high priest asked them, ²⁸Saying, Did not we straitly command you that ye should not teach in this name?(Acts 5:27-28, KJV)

To which, St. Peter gave the brave and true answer:

²⁹Then Peter and the other apostles

answered and said, We ought to obey God rather than men.(Acts 5:29)

Well, in this morning's story of the Flight into Egypt and the Slaughter of the Innocents, we see two examples of obedience: one is obedience to God, the other is obedience to men. One is the obedience of Joseph. The other is the obedience of Herod's soldiers. The children paid the cost of the terrible difference between obeying God and obeying men.

So, let's start with the good kind of obedience: Joseph's obedience to the Lord. An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said to him, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there till I tell you." And Joseph did so. He gathered his little family and off they went, down to Egypt.

Joseph believed that *the Lord* was speaking to him, and so, naturally, he obeyed. And yet, is it so "natural" that he should obey? The thing commanded of him was hard. Ancient folk were very much tied to their villages and to their kin. Even in our modern world, it is hard for some people to leave behind their families and their towns. When Carol and I visited Italy this past spring, our tour guide, Francesca, mentioned that she was born and raised in Rome, that she lived just a few houses away from her parents, that all her brothers and sisters lived nearby, and that for many Italians, they could no more imagine packing up and moving off to another city than they could imagine packing up and

moving to the moon. It just isn't done. Yet, here is Joseph, doing it. The Lord says go, and the man goes.

Egypt is a foreign land to Joseph. Who will receive him there? How will he communicate? He does not know the Egyptian language. He's not a linguist, but a carpenter. Where will he find a synagogue? Where will he find a grocery store with the kinds of food he and Mary like to eat? What about a family doctor? What about the journey between Bethlehem and Egypt? Will robbers fall upon them? Will they be caught in terrible weather? And where in particular should they settle in Egypt? Is it good to settle near the Nile River? What about those crocodiles people talk about?

For practical reasons like this, it was probably hard for Joseph to obey the Lord. He obeyed, yes, but it was not entirely natural that he should obey — indeed, he probably had to fight against his natural impulses to stay put where he was in Israel.

But beyond these practical considerations, there is the spiritual reality that each of *us* has received commandments from the Lord, but how are we doing in the matter of obedience? Do we not start off nearly every liturgy with the confession that we are “in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves”? Do we not admit that we do have not loved the Lord with all our hearts, nor our neighbors as ourselves? It would not have been an entirely strange thing if Joseph had disobeyed. The devil could have tempted him with plausible excuses: If this Child is the king of the Jews, why is he fleeing the land already? What kind of a king is that? If this child is the Son of God, why should we fear Herod? Surely, God will protect him?

But Joseph obeys, and he deserves credit for obeying.

In the end, you and I are kin to Joseph. Like him, the good Lord has entrusted people to us. Maybe we have a little family to take care of, as Joseph had Mary and the Child. Maybe we have a fiancé or a friend or students or colleagues to care for. However large, however little our responsibilities, let us resolve upon

this principle: when the Lord speaks to us about other people in our lives, we mean to obey. Honor your father and your mother. Do not murder. Commit no adultery. Be no thief, nor liar, nor gossip. And be not covetous of your neighbor — neither of your neighbor's things nor his people. Let your neighbor have peace. These are the commandments of God to you and to me, as surely as the angel of the Lord spoke to Joseph about fleeing to Egypt. Let us follow his good example in taking care of others.

So, Joseph obeyed God. Now, let's turn to the soldiers. They obeyed man. They obeyed a wicked man. The king commands a massacre: “Kill the baby boys of Bethlehem.” The king is wicked overmuch: Not only does he command that death of the baby boys of Bethlehem, but also of all the male children “in all that region.” Thus the king widens the net of death, taking in a whole region in a mad attempt to kill the Christ Child.

Only it is not the king who gets blood on his hands. He remains safe and sound in his palace, with lots of water nearby to try to wash guilt from his hands. No, the king commands, but the soldiers perform the deed. The king commands, but the soldiers obey. And we could well wish that they had not obeyed.

I have mentioned this autobiographical note before: When I was a young man — the age of my boys now — I was a cadet at the U.S. Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs. I did not complete my training, but I was an Academy cadet for two years, and I am very grateful for that introduction to military life.

Looking back on those times, I see that there were two occasions in which I could have washed out of the Academy before I even got started. The first was my meeting with my local congressman's staff, when I was seeking a nomination to the Academy. Those were the days of the Vietnam War. I remember the staff asking me about the My Lai Massacre¹. They

¹ Song My village, Son Tinh district of South Vietnam, March 16, 1968, 347 to 504 deaths, Task force from the United States Army Americal Division, Lt. William Calley (convicted)

asked me whether I would have done as Lt. William Calley had done. If I had understood myself to be under orders to commit a massacre, would I have done it? Or if I had been a soldier under the man, would I have obeyed? I answered no, and strangely, the congressman's committee gave me no feedback on my answer. They simply let me go, and a few weeks later they sent me a letter saying that I would not be receiving the congressman's nomination to the Academy. I do not know whether my discussion of My Lie had anything to do with this or not. In any case, I received a nomination for another source and so headed off to the Academy.

But almost immediately I ran into trouble at the Academy. That first day, after our hair had been cut off and we had been issued our fatigues and combat boots, we were divided up into groups and administered the U.S. Military Oath of Enlistment.

And I did not take the Oath. I just stood there like a bump on the log. It wasn't for any grand philosophical reasons that I declined to take the oath. Certainly I did not mean to be defiant, nor to make a scene. It was just that the officer in charge had previewed the oath for us, which is proper, and I found myself thinking, "I cannot take that oath. It asks for the kind of obedience I can only grant to God." So, I just stood there silently.

But an officer saw me standing there silently and led me away to a private room. He asked me why I had not spoken the words of the oath, and I told him my theory — that I could swear such allegiance only to God.

And the officer gave this strange reply: He said that it was precisely because I could grant such allegiance only God that he wanted me to go back in there and take the oath of allegiance to the military. He said that in the end, that was the kind of officer the military needs.

Now, this is a complicated and subtle subject. The military lives by obedience — instant obedience. You cannot have soldiers standing there debating whether or not they

should obey an order. If they do that, then their brother or sister soldiers to their side can die while they are there thinking things over.

And yet, people who have lived in the twentieth century should not that there are times when we must obey God and not men. It is the judgment of Nuremberg: It is not enough to say, I was just following orders.

Now, I do not know exactly how to apply this principle to your life. I just know that from time to time, you too are on the battlefield and must make your choice. In the course of a long lifetime, it might come our way as it came to the apostles, that they had to make a choice between the God and the king. Then we should join the apostolic testimony:

Then Peter and the other apostles answered and said, We ought to obey God rather than men. (Acts 5:29, KJV)

Herod hurled his mightiest weapon at Christ — death — but it did not succeed. And those soldiers who obeyed Herod's wicked orders, wasted their time and squandered their humanity.

Herod must die. All tyrants must die. Their time will come. It would be good not to be on Herod's side.

He who was the occasion for the shedding of blood of these children will one day shed his own blood of their behalf, that they might live forever in heaven. That is the side on which it is good to be found. I speak of Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.