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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
2/27/2013, Midweek Lent 2  
Matthew 2:10-18  
King Herod's Massacre of the Innocents

PRAYER OF THE DAY

☐ Eternal God, it is your glory always to have mercy. Bring back all who have erred and strayed from your ways; lead them again to embrace in faith the truth of your Word and to hold it fast; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

HOLY SCRIPTURE ..... Matthew 2:10-18, KJV

<sup>10</sup>When they saw the [the wise men] star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. <sup>11</sup>And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh. <sup>12</sup>And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way. <sup>13</sup>And when they were departed, behold, the angel of the Lord appeareth to Joseph in a dream, saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and flee into Egypt, and be thou there until I bring thee word: for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him. <sup>14</sup>When he arose, he took the young child and his mother by night, and departed into Egypt: <sup>15</sup>And was there until the death of Herod: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Out of Egypt have I called my son. <sup>16</sup>Then Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceeding wroth, and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently enquired of the wise men. <sup>17</sup>Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by Jeremy the prophet, saying, <sup>18</sup>In Rama was there a voice heard, lamentation, and weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, and would not be comforted, because they are not.

HYMN LBW 423     *Lord, Whose Love in Humble Service*

## SERMON

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

<sup>16</sup>Then Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceeding wroth, and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently enquired of the wise men.  
(Matthew 2:16, KJV)

Herod Antipas, who ordered the beheading of John the Baptist, had nothing on his father, Herod the Great, for that old man was a bloodthirsty man indeed. I know there is a hell, because the Bible says so. I know that the devil is heading there, again, because the Bible says so. And if human beings end up in that dreadful place, I reckon Herod will be among them. I must leave that to Jesus, for he is the final Judge, but in my eyes, Herod the Great is one of the lowest and foulest of people this world has known. In his sick world, for example, he found it fine to kill his wife and two of his own sons.<sup>1</sup> But if he had done no other wicked deeds, this one alone would have condemned him in my eyes: that he ordered the death of the innocent little boys of Bethlehem.

Picture the man on his throne. He is an old man, but his wits are still sharp—sharp, that is, for his own interest. He has destroyed many a man and woman in the past. He means to destroy the Christ Child too. He has manipulated the ones we call the “wise men.” In many respects they are indeed wise, but not in wandering into Jerusalem. By what authority did they enter that town? They had been following the star. It did not lead them to Jerusalem. In fact, when they entered Jerusalem, the star left them, and it was only after they left Jerusalem that the star, to their joy, returned and guided them on to Bethlehem. They had detoured to Jerusalem because of human reasoning. They seem to have figured that they could leave off following the star because they were in search of the new “king of the Jews,” and a “king” would be in the capitol city, Jerusalem. They followed worldly wisdom, but in the process they had a role to play in the massacre of the innocents. I have been mad at the wise men for years that they did this thing. They should not have gone to Jerusalem. They should not have gone right into the spider’s web, right up to the devouring spider himself, Herod.

But they did, and Herod set in play his usual kind of machinations. He pretended to be interested in this new Christ Child. In an obscene lie, he directed the wise men to go, find the Child, so that he could come and worship him. Worship! He has no intention of worshiping the Child, but rather of

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<sup>1</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herod\\_the\\_great](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herod_the_great)

destroying the Child, and he means to use these wise men for his cruel plan. Herod has set in play many brutal plans in the past. He set this one in play too: Go, find the Child, and come and tell me.

So, Herod sits on his throne, satisfied with himself for his wicked plan. And he sits. And he sits some more. And gradually it dawns on him that his plan is not working out. Plenty of his plans have worked out in the past, but this one is not working.

How did he respond? Well, he could have shrugged and said, “Go in peace all of you. You wise men, you Christ Child: all of you, go in peace. I meant to destroy this Child, I gave it a try, but it is not working, so I mean to forget about it. I am old man. I do not have much time left on this earth. I do not mean to use the time remaining to me to commit yet more wickedness.”

Yes, Herod could have responded with such a spirit of reconciliation. But it was not in his nature to do so. His madness was of the unrelenting sort. Instead of shrugging and letting his plan go, he instead grows “wroth.” How wroth? “Exceeding wroth.” How exceeding? So vast was his fury that he “and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof.”

## **ALAS**

Alas, Herod is not the sole member of his species: killers of the innocent. You would think that being “innocent” would be protection enough in this world against legal authority. You would think that that status—innocent!—would mean that the official course of justice would have to flow right around the innocent one, as if the innocent one is an island that the river of justice is just going to have to bypass and leave in peace.

But it is not so, and it has never been so. Indeed, our modern times have given some of the worst examples of mowing down the innocent. It was the duly elected Nazi government of Germany that slaughtered the Jews. It was the Allies and the Germans alike who firebombed cities. It was our government that dropped the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It was the legitimate government of Stalin who executed millions of ordinary people. It was our government who napalmed villages in Vietnam. It was one who claimed spiritual authority who ordered the hijackers to fly into the World Trade Center. It is the spiritual authorities who send suicide bombers to blow up buses and markets. It is ordinary people who take the life of babies in the womb—not because of threat to the life of the mother, not because of rape or incest, but for other reasons that seem compelling, but overrun the innocent status of the baby. Criminals blow away the innocent in robberies and murders. Troubled grown-ups and troubled teenagers sometimes make it their business to kill the innocent. They are not determined to kill just those they hate. They are

determined also to kill those they do not know and who are innocent of any wrongdoing against them. They are innocent, yes, but that is no protection.

## THE GOSPEL

It is easy for me to complain about the death of the innocent. There is too much of it. There are too many examples of it.

What is harder is to talk about is the Gospel in face of the death of the innocent. It is harder to talk about hope and salvation. But in the end, that is always the most important subject. That is the heart of the Gospel: it is that a sinful world nonetheless has hope of salvation because of Jesus of Nazareth—this very Child cruel Herod tried to kill.

The killing of children has always appalled humanity. Such deaths break not only the laws of the land, but also the laws of the heart, seeing how our Maker has put into many of us both delight and almost a sense of reverence before little children. Who can harm a child? It is inhuman.

And it is not just our modern age that cherishes children. The ancient church fathers also knew humanity's outrage over the death of children.

I mean to turn to St. John Chrysostom for help with this problem. I genuinely feel that I need help here. It is hard to speak of hope and of God when thinking about the death of children. My mind can phrase some thoughts of hope, but my heart has trouble catching up. Let's see whether Chrysostom can help us along.

He makes three points: one about the children themselves, one about King Herod, and one about our God. Let's begin with the children.

Chrysostom feels that it is right and natural for the parents and for all those who loved the children to grieve for them. Indeed, life in Bethlehem and surrounding villages was forever changed for those mothers and fathers on that awful day when the soldiers came and slew their children. But Chrysostom hopes that these parents can take some comfort in our faith that their children have not perished or ceased to be, but rather, as Chrysostom puts it, they have been "borne away speedily into that waveless harbor."<sup>2</sup> He means heaven. It is a nautical image—the idea of the "waveless harbor." It puts us in mind of seafaring folk who have wrestled long and hard against a storm on the sea. It is an immense, powerful, and dangerous force: a storm on the sea. The wind and waves can batter their bodies, ruin their wits, and drive them to despair. But if after much labors and fear, they should make it to harbor, especially to a calm harbor protected from the storm, then those sailors are happy again. Indeed, they have joy that goes beyond anything known in ordinary life. Likewise, the death of the little boys of Bethlehem is an outrageous sin and a true cause of

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<sup>2</sup> St. John Chrysostom, Homily on Matthew 2:16.

sorrow, yet for those little boys themselves, they have set sail and landed in heaven, and they are safe with the One who said:

“Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 19:14, RSV)

So, that is a comforting idea about the children themselves. Now, let’s turn to King Herod, who ordered their deaths.

Chrysostom was aware that there are people so troubled by the death of the children that they wonder why God did it. Why did the story of Jesus take this form? Why did it have to include the death of the innocent children? The children of Bethlehem were left to be slain. When Joseph gathered up Mary and Jesus and fled down to Egypt, “other children are massacred in the place of Him who was sought.” Why did God have to do things this awful way?

To this question, Chrysostom answers, God did not do it. Herod did:

What then is the solution of these things? or what fair account of them can we give? That Christ was not the cause of their slaughter, but the king’s cruelty;

Chrysostom is right about this. Herod did the cruel deed, not the Lord. That is why things look so grim for Herod. The great day of judgment comes, when each of us must give an account of our deeds. It will certainly be as Jesus says:

<sup>26</sup>For just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself; <sup>27</sup>and he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man. <sup>28</sup>Do not be astonished at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice <sup>29</sup>and will come out-- those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation. (John 5:26-29, NRSV)

Likewise with St. Paul, who wrote this to the Romans:

<sup>10</sup>Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God; <sup>11</sup>for it is written, “As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.” <sup>12</sup>So each of us shall give account of himself to God. (Romans 14:10-12, RSV)

King Herod might not have imagined this to be so in his moment of murder. But it simply is so! Herod must answer for the death of these children.

Now, I think I must slow down for Chrysostom's third point. It is a point about God. I find it a hard idea to follow, yet I think he is onto something.

Chrysostom begins by anticipating that the first two answers will not suffice for some people. They will be glad that the children sailed on into heaven, and glad that Herod must give answer for what he did. Still, they will wonder why God permits all this misery in the first place. Let me quote Chrysostom's surprising answer:

“Yea,” saith one, “Herod thou hast full well deprived of excuse, and proved him blood-thirsty; but thou hast not yet solved the question about the injustice of what took place. For if he did unjustly, wherefore did God permit it?” Now, what should we say to this? That which I do not cease to say continually, in church, in the market-place and everywhere; that which I also wish you carefully to keep in mind, for it is a sort of rule for us, suited to every such perplexity. What then is our rule, and what our saying? That although there be many that injure, yet is there not so much as one that is injured.

This is indeed a rule for Chrysostom. In fact, he has a whole treatise along these lines: That although there be many that injure, yet none are injured.

Then Chrysostom proceeds with a clarification of his surprising theme:

And in order that the riddle may not disturb you too much, I add the solution too with all speed. I mean, that what we may suffer unjustly from any one, it tells either to the doing away of our sins, God so putting that wrong to our account; or unto the recompense of rewards.

So, Chrysostom is not denying that there is injustice in this world. He is simply saying that the injustice does not injure those we suppose to be injured, for the injury either works out to redress the real wrongs we have done, or to give us rewards. And none of this would be possible apart from our God.

Chrysostom then offers an illustration:

...suppose a certain servant who owes much money to his master, and then that this servant has been despitefully used by unjust men, and robbed of some of his goods. If then the master, in whose power it was to stay the plunderer and

wrong doer [like the Lord], should not indeed restore that same property, but should reckon what was taken away towards what was owed him by his servant, is the servant then injured? By no means. But what if he should repay him even more? Has he not then even gained more than he has lost? Every one, I suppose, perceives it.

Chrysostom then gives an illustration from the Bible. It is a story about a fellow named Shimei, who added to King David's misery at a time when David was fleeing for his life from his own son, Absalom. During that miserable time, Shimei cursed David. David's soldiers wanted to kill Shimei for his curses, but David forbade it. The story is found in Second Samuel 16. Chrysostom says this:

...remember David, how, when he saw Shimei at a certain time assailing him, and trampling on his affliction, and pouring on him revilings without end, his captains desiring to slay him, he utterly forbade them, saying, "Let him curse, that the Lord may look upon mine abasement, and that he may requite me good for this cursing this day."

Chrysostom then draws this conclusion:

They therefore who are wronged, are not wronged if they bear nobly all that they suffer, yea, rather they gain even more abundantly, whether they be smitten of God, or scourged by the devil.

Well, maybe, but what about the children? What wrong have they done that can be restored by the injury? Chrysostom anticipates this question too:

"But what kind of sin had these children," it may be said, "that they should do it away? for touching those who are of full age, and have been guilty of many negligences, one might with show of reason speak thus: but they who so underwent premature death, what sort of sins did they by their sufferings put away?" Didst thou not hear me say, that though there were no sins, there is a recompense of rewards hereafter for them that suffer ill here?

I've never actually seen Chrysostom budge from his rule: That although there be many that injure, yet is there not so much as one that is injured.

Adding it all up, it seems to amount to this: To the question, “Why does God permit such injury?” Chrysostom answers, “He does not, for he permits no injury to these children.”

For me, this is a hard idea to follow, for it certainly looks to me that slashing and slaying and stabbing amount to injury. To imagine the dead little boys of Bethlehem and to say, “Well, King Herod tried to hurt them, but failed,” takes a faith that I guess I have not yet attained.

One thing is clear to me about Chrysostom’s idea: It reflects his faith in eternity. He really believes that there is more to life than these threescore and ten years we are given, or in the case of the little boys of Bethlehem, more than the two years they knew. With this, I agree. We all die, some in old age, some as children. We all die, some peacefully, some violently. But whenever and however we die, there is more of the story to be told, and that part of it is beyond the reach of even so powerful a man as King Herod.

## **A CLOSING THOUGHT**

I close with this thought: There was one more innocent child who dies in this story. He lived another thirty years or so, but in the end, another Herod’s son, Herod Antipas, played his miserable role in the death of this child too. But the thing is, this child is the only begotten Son of God. He is the holy Child, the Savior of the world. He suffered innocently. Sinful hands were laid upon his sinless flesh. Agonizing death was laid upon him, though in no manner did he deserve it. I try to be polite to other religions, but I just can’t think of one where God himself knows in his own body and blood what it means to suffer unjustly in this world. And he is the risen One! He is the innocent Child who suffered and died, and he is the One we can trust to set things right, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.