

Sermon for the First Sunday After Christmas: Holy Innocents

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Normally, the way the church calendar works, when there's a special observance on a particular date and that date falls on a Sunday, we say the celebration of the mini-Easter that is every Sunday takes precedence over the special observance, and the special observance gets transferred to the next closest non-special observance day. That's all a fancy way to tell you that, because today is Sunday, we're supposed to have normal Sunday stuff on our minds. The readings were the typical First Sunday After Christmas readings. The Liturgy's a normal Sunday liturgy. Most everything about Sunday's supposed to be about Sunday. But it's also December 28th, and the special observances around this time of year tend to get overshadowed by mangers, drummer boys, and whatever myrrh is. Were it not a Sunday, December 28th would be the Feast of the Holy Innocents, and though we're not *technically* celebrating it until tomorrow thanks to all that precedence and transferring, it's worth a reminder that the Twelve Days of Christmas aren't all jolly and bright. The Feast of the Holy Innocents is a brutal reminder of how the world can take goodness and turn it sour.

As the story goes, Jesus was born. There were shepherds and angels, the whole shebang. Then the Wise Men showed up, and when they arrived, they met Herod who'd heard a rumor about some newborn that would take his crown. Thinking he was more clever than he was, Herod asked the travellers to come back and tell him where they found the barn-born baby. Thanks to some divine intervention, the Wise Men thought better of it and after feteing Jesus, they returned by a different path. This left Herod with no new intel, so instead of keeping at it, he did the unthinkable. He ordered all boys under the age of 2 killed. He figured, it may be a slaughter, but at least it would be a slaughter that kept him in power. To escape the unthinkable threat, Mary and Joseph fled to Egypt with their newborn child in tow. If you've ever heard them referred to as refugees, this is why, and it's a textbook example. They fled across national borders to escape targeted persecution, and were they to return before the threat expired, Jesus would be killed before he spoke his first word. So they waited until it was safe to return. This is also why we can talk about Jesus as coming up from Egypt! He may've been born in Bethlehem and grown up in Nazareth, but he's got Egypt in his roots, too.

Now that's an incredibly difficult part of our story, and maybe you can see why it tends to get glossed over this time of year. Infanticide isn't exactly the most popular topic at Christmas Dinner, and it certainly doesn't fit the Hallmark narrative of nothing but joy and peace at the tail end of the year. No, Holy Innocents holds our gaze with uncomfortably intense focus on human suffering. You can take that to mean any number of kinds of suffering, too. It could be grief, illness, the loss of a child, a miscarriage, persecution, systematic oppression, to name a sliver of the suffering we see. But there's another layer here: suffering as a result of proximity to Christ. Following the Nativity story, none of those babies would've been killed if Jesus hadn't been born, if the Wise Men had given up his location, or, if Herod got lucky and the Holy Family hadn't fled. I'm not saying it was Jesus's fault, just that his arrival led to Herod confronting the tenuous impermanence of his position and that landed him at a dreadful solution. I don't think you'll find many that would blame anyone but Herod for the massacre of the Holy Innocents, but I regularly hear from people who say it is better to stay quiet while regimes rage because doing the right thing makes you a target. I know it's not exactly the same thing. Doing the right thing doesn't mean you're particularly innocent, certainly not as innocent as a child, but it's a similar situation. Had Jesus not been born, none of that that followed would've happened.

I mentioned Oscar Romero a couple of weeks ago. He was killed at the altar for speaking out against injustice. Thomas Beckett was killed in a church for speaking out against injustice, too. Martin Luther King, Jr., Robert Kennedy (the first one), Gandhi, Jesus, and countless others -- dead for speaking out. And there are those who claim it's their own fault. If they never spoke out, they never would've been targeted, and never

being targeted means they would've lived longer. That mentality puts the blame for their own deaths on themselves rather than on the person who killed them. Sounds unreasonable, right? I wish it were so unreasonable as to never happen, but that's just not so. I told the Bible Study group the other day that in my career, I've received death threats a couple of times. Not as many as you might imagine, and they aren't new. I got my first back in Arkansas, and I'm certain I've yet to receive my last. Never once have I gotten one of those threats when I've spoken out to defend myself. The only times I've had my life threatened were times when I've spoken out for someone else. And in some of those threats, that same unreasonable mentality comes through, sometimes explicitly. If only I hadn't spoken up, they'd say, I wouldn't've drawn their ire (and would finally be able to sleep soundly at night). Put differently, if I'd just kept my mouth shut, they wouldn't be forced to close it for me. Now, I don't tell you this to frighten you or to seek your sympathy. I tell you this because I'm not rare. I know many clergy who've received these same kinds of threats.

But it's not just about clergy. It's about people. And if Holy Innocents points our gaze anywhere, it's to the people who suffer unjustly now. They're the ones we're called to serve; Jesus and the countless prophets that came before him made that abundantly clear. But we're not just meant to serve them. We're meant to protect them, too. These days, helping people who need help has become an incredibly dangerous task, but that's where we're called. Do not let anyone discourage you from meeting that need for fear of being responsible for what evildoers do. To put a finer point on it, standing between modern day Herods and modern day innocents is exactly where Christians are meant to stand, protecting those who need it from those who wish to cause harm. That may mean helping with medical bills. It may mean feeding someone who hasn't bathed in a month. It may mean, God forbid, it may mean saving a neighbor from deportation. It may mean serving justice, come what may. But I want you to remember, just like the slaughter of the Holy Innocents wasn't Jesus's fault, serving justice is not a good enough reason for someone to cause you harm. That's the argument of a child. Literally. When I was a kid, there was this "game" bullies liked to play where they'd grab your arm and, before you could react, smack you in the face with your own hand while taunting, "why are you hitting yourself, why are you hitting yourself?" That's what I'm talking about. Oscar Romero, Martin Luther King, all those I mentioned before...they weren't killed because they spoke out. They were killed because evil men thinking like children couldn't stand to be confronted with true justice. The same was true when Jesus was born, it's true now, and unfortunately I suspect it will stay true for a mighty long time. And, ya know, the Feast of the Holy Innocents reminds us that sorrow in this season isn't just okay, it's woven into the story from the beginning. It's okay to feel grief over what and who's been lost alongside all the joy and celebration.

But this feast also reminds us that the story we celebrate every year cannot be reduced to the quaint beauty of the manger scene. It's bigger, it reaches incredibly far, and much as we love the sweetness of the season, we gotta remember that the whole point of that baby's birth we're celebrating is the life that follows it, a life that reminds us time and again not just to serve others but to orient our salvation so that it's inextricably woven into the wellbeing of our communities. Serving our communities, especially the most vulnerable, targeted, discriminated against in our communities isn't just rewarding work; it's the reason for the season. And that reason may put us in harm's way. Not saying we seek out harm, but, again, we gotta hold onto the knowledge that, for all its beauty, this world is not prepared to see what true goodness looks like, at least, the leaders of this world aren't. The people are starving for it, and y'all, we've got so many ways to fill their bellies. The risk is not in doing good; the risk is in those who recognize goodness as an affront against their evildoing. Stay safe, my dear people of God, but stay just, stay good, and stay holy while you're at it. I'd like to finish up this morning with the collect we would've said if we were observing the Holy Innocents. Let us pray.

We remember today, O God, the slaughter of the holy innocents of Bethlehem by King Herod. Receive, we pray, into the arms of your mercy all innocent victims; and by your great might frustrate the designs of evil tyrants and establish your rule of justice, love, and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.