

2 Christmas 2020

Gentle God, you shepherd us in times of trouble. When the way seems dark, you guide us safely through. Anoint us with your spirit of blessing, that we might be as Christ to each another; welcoming, compassionate and caring. Amen.

We have just experienced the wonder and excitement of the Nativity; the angels proclaiming God's presence on the earth in the baby Jesus; and John's proclamation of the Word made flesh and dwelling among us. In all of this jubilation and celebration, who could have predicted the story of evil and fear which followed? Christmas in all of its beauty and wonder that it has become, was also surrounded by danger and uncertainty. The long and arduous journey of a very pregnant Mary travelling with Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem, arriving just in time for her to deliver and no room for them except with the animals. On Christmas Eve, we talked about the 30 % mortality rate of infants in the time of Jesus within the first year of life. Being born in a barn would not have improved those rates for Jesus. We know about the arrival of the Magi or wisemen to seek out and to worship the long-awaited King. This became a short-lived celebration as it was accompanied by intrigue, greed, jealousy, and danger. The joy had quickly disappeared and replaced by fear. Enter King Herod into the story. Would Herod have known about Jesus without the arrival of the wisemen? Probably. But

having been deceived by the wisemen going back home by a different route, Herod was a little ticked off. One of the choices we have for the Gospel reading today, is the first 12 verses of this chapter. It ends with the wisemen going back home by a different route to avoid Herod. Choosing these verses, leaves out that part of the story which tells of Herod ordering the killing of all males under the age of two. We know this as the "Slaughter of the Innocents." Certainly, this is not part of the story that we read on Christmas. And frankly, I could have avoided reading it today and prolonging just a little longer the peace of the Christmas season. But it is part of the story of Jesus that we need to be reminded of.

Believe it or not, there's a Christmas carol about those innocent children. It's called the Coventry Carol. Ironically, it has one of the most beautiful melodies of all Christmas music. The words are a melancholy lullaby, sung by grieving mothers to their dead children:

Lullay, Thou little tiny Child,  
By, by, lully, lullay.

O sisters too, how may we do,  
For to preserve this day.  
This poor youngling for whom we sing  
By, by, lully, lullay.

Herod the king, in his raging,  
Charged he hath this day.  
His men of might, in his own sight,  
All young children to slay.

That woe is me, poor Child for Thee!  
And ever morn and day,  
For thy parting neither say nor sing,  
By, by, lully, lullay.

It really does have a very beautiful melody despite the sad message. And as you can imagine, this is not commonly sung on Christmas.

There is no doubt that Herod ranked right up there with some of the vilest rulers in the middle east, a real piece of work.

During the course of his reign, Herod had at least nine wives and 14 children.

There were probably more, but daughters' births were not always recorded. He put one of his wives, Mariamne I, on trial for adultery. Chief witness for the prosecution was Mariamne's own mother -- who, it's said, testified against her daughter only because she feared for her own life. Herod executed his wife,

which led her mother to declare herself queen, charging that Herod was mentally unfit to rule. Not a wise decision on her part. Herod put her to death without a trial.

There's more. There were two young sons remaining from Herod's marriage to Mariamne. As they grew older, the king considered them threats to his power. He sought to put them on trial for treason, but Emperor Augustus put a stop to that by ordering the sons and the father to reconcile. A few years later, Herod outmaneuvered the emperor. He sent a huge financial donation to revive the Olympic Games, something Augustus very much wanted. In exchange, the emperor allowed Herod to execute his two sons. Later, though, Augustus was heard to mutter, "I would rather be Herod's dog than Herod's son."

But that's still not all. After murdering his wife and his two sons, Herod named his eldest son, Antipater -- a child of a different mother -- the exclusive heir to the throne. But Herod never could tolerate a rival. He grew jealous of his latest crown prince. He put him on trial for treason like the others and had him executed. The emperor was so appalled that he refused to allow any of Herod's remaining sons to claim the title of king -- although three of them would eventually rule as "tetrarchs," each governing one-third of his father's realm.

As I said, a real piece of work. Someone you did not want to know all that well.

Of course, we know that Jesus escaped the fate of the infant boys. An angel of the Lord came to Joseph in a dream, warning him to take his little family and flee to Egypt. There they probably settled in the thriving Jewish quarter of Alexandria, a great center of learning. It's possible that Jesus spent his early years there, and learned Talmud from the distinguished rabbis of that city.

Some of us will find it troubling that Jesus escaped with the aid of an angel's message but others died. It is one of the theological issues that we all deal with at one time or another. The old adage of 'Why do bad things happen to good people'? Although we cannot know the definitive answer to this question, personally, I believe that God does not cause evil. We have free will and God allows that free will to exist. Unfortunately, evil is part of that free will and bad things happen as a result. King Herod was an example of that evil playing out. The Bible only tells us that the Holy Family escaped to Egypt. Coptic (Egyptian) Christians have identified about twenty-five places where they believe that Mary, Joseph and Jesus stayed during their journey within Egypt. At the 'Monastery of the Syrians' which is in Western Egypt, a 6th century fresco shows Mary nursing the infant Jesus.

Although we are not sure just how long the Holy Family stayed in Egypt, they were indeed refugees escaping from their home to a nearby country in order to escape persecution and death. Fortunately for them, they were able to safely return once Herod had died. It is very difficult not to associate our story of the Holy Family with the plight of refugees throughout the world today. In fact, the symbol for Episcopal Migration Ministries is a depiction of the Holy Family on their trek through Egypt. The topics of Immigration and refugees are a politically charged issue today. As we know, the status of these folks within and outside of the U.S. is very fragile. Extreme limitations on those seeking asylum have been placed and the numbers allowed into this country have significantly decreased. Despite on how you may feel about this as a policy issue, it has direct and important connotations for us as Episcopalians and Christians. We need to stayed informed as to what is happening around us.

I just read an article siting the current administration's expansion of the "Public Charge Law" which was first federally enacted back in 1882. Honestly, I was not aware about this and I had to look it up. According to the Center for Immigration Studies:

“A "public charge" is someone who cannot provide for himself and thus relies on public assistance for a substantial part of his or her livelihood; it is someone who is a charge, or responsibility, of the public. Individuals who are deemed as likely to become charges of the public are excluded from entering the United States. If an immigrant becomes a public charge, he or she may be deported.

The policy of excluding potential public charges, seeks to ensure that individuals unable or unwilling to sustain themselves will not burden society. It embodies the idea that an immigrant should be self-sufficient and contribute to the society granting him or her the privilege of becoming a new member. It is one of the conditions of the social contract.

The chief goal of American immigration policy has always been to admit productive, self-reliant individuals who positively contribute to society.

Policymakers employed immigration to help reach these goals, largely limiting admission to able-bodied, responsible individuals. "Desirable" immigrants have been expected to pay taxes, exhibit republican virtues, and possess good moral character. Public charges fall under the category of "undesirables." They put a drain on society, rather than contribute productively and positively to it.

The Immigration and Nationality Act, the basic U.S. immigration statute that was enacted in 1952 and amended in 1965, states: "Any alien likely at any time to become a public charge" is not to be admitted into the country. It goes on to say that Immigrants who become public charges within five years of entry into the country, are subject to being deported, unless they can prove the causes of their reliance on public assistance. So, although this policy is again being expanded upon, it is not new.

It may seem a little trite and passé, but I still believe that with almost any issue, we need to ask ourselves and each other, "What **would** Jesus do". That is an essential question. What follows is a natural extension of this. What do we need to do as a result? To leave that question unanswered is to not live out our Christianity.

Shelley Matthews a New Testament Professor at Brite Divinity School in Fort Worth, Texas wrote the following:

"It is hard to read in a world in which the number of political refugees has reached into unprecedented heights; in which the number of children fleeing from what might be certain death in their own countries for the United States, is paralyzing the system in place for dealing with such children; and in which



hostility toward immigrants, including those seeking political asylum, is also high -  
- without coming face to face with the sobering fact: if Joseph had received the dream to leave his endangered village and take refuge in a foreign country with his family in global-political circumstances similar to our own, he would likely have been turned back at the border, told to wait it out and hope for the best in Bethlehem. She continues: "As conversations concerning the problem of immigration swirl around us, all those who identify as Christians, and who thus honor the Christ at the center of our faith, would do well to contemplate the following: The baby Jesus is saved from the wrath of Herod only because he and his family are able to cross a border". In other words, would Jesus have survived if his survival depended on legally crossing the border into our country? Professor Matthews wrote this, not in 2020, but back in 2016. Different administration, same issues.

Things could have turned out quite differently with the Holy Family, but God had a plan and was in control. Joseph heard the angel's message and obeyed. God has not stopped speaking to us today. She is still in control. But we need to find a way to **hear his** message and to **heed that** message. It won't be easy. But it will be worth it.

Amen!