

Sermon Slaughter of Holy Innocence
January 3, 2016
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Matthew 2:13-23
Jesus Walked in Danger All the Way

I walk in danger all the way. The thought shall never leave me
That Satan, who has marked his prey, Is plotting to deceive me.
This foe with hidden snares
May seize me unawares
If I should fail to watch and pray.
I walk in Danger all the way.

This hymn, written by Hans Adolf Brorson, epitomizes the perilous journey of the Christian through this valley of the shadow of death, which we call life on earth. The warning of Saint Peter should be learned by heart by all Christians, “Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.” (1 Peter 5:8) And yet, we learn in our Gospel text that this hymn could be sung by the infant Jesus. Yes, before the Christmas trees have been taken down and the song of the angels still echoes in the hills, the infant Jesus is on the lam. He no longer lies asleep on the hay. And the Silent Night is interrupted by wailing of mothers and fathers for their children.

Mary is shaken awake. Her husband Joseph has seen the angel again. This time the angel doesn't tell him to not be afraid, but rather to flee to Egypt. Herod has determined to destroy the infant child. The holy family escapes that very night under the cover of darkness even as Herod's brute squad arrives to do the unthinkable in that once quiet town of Bethlehem.

Why does Jesus flee with his mother and Joseph to Egypt? What a silly question, there are soldiers out to kill him by order of the king! King Herod had no legitimate right to the throne. He was given the crown by the occupying Romans. He was no son of David. News from the wise men that a Son of David was born in Bethlehem, called the King of the Jews sent a shock up the spine of the already paranoid homicidal king. When the wise men did not return to him to give the location of the boy king, King Herod ordered a genocide of all male baby boys in Bethlehem. He was determined to snuff out this root of Jesse, so that he would never bloom. So of course Jesus fled.

Yet isn't Jesus God? The angel armies performed a choral masterpiece before shepherds to declare his birth. Couldn't God have prevented Herod from chasing Jesus like a hunted fox? Couldn't Jesus use his divine powers to thwart Herod's plans? Why must this family risk their hides so soon after Jesus' marvelous birth? The answer: this episode marks the beginning of Jesus' persecution on earth. It is part of his humiliation. Jesus, the God-man, must walk in danger all the way to the cross. Men would seek his life just as Satan sought his soul. Jesus Christ must be humiliated *for you*.

Yes, it is for your sake that Christ must suffer this way, even as a baby maybe a couple months old. He must be despised and rejected by men. And he must go to Egypt, so that God may call his true Son out of Egypt and fulfill the prophecy of Hosea (11:1). God had called Israel, his son, out of Egypt to live before him in righteousness, but the people of Israel failed miserably. Christ came to do what neither Israel or the Gentiles could ever do, live holy before God. And he did this under constant threat of death.

Now certainly, Christ must die. He must be killed by evil men, suffer for the transgression of his people. But Jesus' life will not be stolen from him. Instead he will lay

it down willingly, even as he has authority to take his life back again (John 10:18). Herod will not be the last one to try to take Jesus' life before the appointed time. Christ will continue to endure such suffering for our sake. Yet, he will not forfeit his life until he willingly hands himself over to the chief priests to die as God's appointed sacrifice for all sins.

We should not dream that Jesus had a peachy life, enjoying the perks of being God and man. Jesus suffered. He was persecuted, even as a baby. And everything he suffered, he endured for you, suffering unjustly, so that you can be justified.

This is one of the most troubling accounts in the whole New Testament.

“Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, 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 that he ascertained from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah:

‘A voice was heard in Ramah,
weeping and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
She refused to be comforted, because they are no more.’”

Couldn't God have spared these children? Couldn't he have sent an angel to warn their parents as well? Why did God permit such suffering, such wickedness? In the same light, we wonder how God can permit such terrible things to happen in our day. Mass shootings, bombings that kill women and children and leave countless maimed. China still practices forced abortions even after they reformed their one-child policy to a two-child policy. And in our own country millions of children have been killed inside the

womb, legally! And many a mother weeps and laments, silently, when she loses her unborn child to a miscarriage. And we are not unfamiliar to parents burying their children at too young an age. Why does God permit these injustices to happen?!

First, we must humble ourselves to the hidden wisdom of God. This is a painful and humiliating task. Under unexplainable suffering, we must at times leave the reasoning up to God. God has revealed his will for us in Christ Jesus. Yet, there exists a hidden will, a hidden wisdom that God has chosen not to reveal to us. And if God has chosen to hide something from our understanding, as Christians we ought to accept his hidden will and focus on his revealed will in Christ Jesus our Savior.

Yet, not all suffering is unexplainable. Sometimes God does reveal why he permits suffering. When Joseph's brothers were fearful that he would take revenge on them after their father's death, Joseph consoled his brothers saying, "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive." (Gen. 50:20) God used Joseph's misfortune of being sold into slavery to eventually save Joseph, his family, and the entire nation of Egypt. God can use misfortune and suffering for good. Even with our own suffering, Saint Paul states, "we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance,⁴ and endurance produces character, and character produces hope,⁵ and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us." (Romans 5:3-5)

Even in this text concerning the innocent babies murdered by King Herod, we can believe that *good* has come of it. It has been the longstanding tradition of the Christian Church that these babies are the first martyrs of Christ, and even now they sing praises to

their risen Lord in paradise. Although Herod intended evil by killing these children, he not only failed to destroy the Lord's Appointed, but he also inadvertently delivered these children into the peaceful arms of their heavenly Father. Tradition has it that these children, even as babes, trusted in the Lord's Christ, even as John the Baptist leapt in his mother's womb at the announcement of Christ's conception. So even out of this horror, God certainly brought great good.

Now while we must leave much suffering to the hidden wisdom and will of God, we Christians are given a clearer understanding of suffering here on earth. Saint Peter writes, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you." You should not be overly afraid to suffer in this life. As a Christian you must suffer, even as your Lord Jesus suffered from his infancy. And when you suffer for doing what is right, then God himself calls you blessed. Jesus says, "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you." (Matthew 5:11-12)

Now this suffering, in which you ought to rejoice, is not any suffering. It is suffering for doing what is right. If you suffer for doing what is wrong, there is no honor in that. It is blasphemous to attempt to make yourself a martyr for suffering, when you suffer for doing something against God's Law. Yet those who suffer for standing on God's Word should rejoice, because God will reward those who suffer in his name. The

Christians who are decapitated and tortured in the Middle East and Africa by ISIS and other Islamic terrorists are blessed. Christians who are mocked, called bigots and homophobes and haters for standing on God's Word by those who hate God's Word, they are blessed by God, even if the entire world hates them.

Finally, suffering teaches us about the world. The world is evil. We should not fall in love with life on this present planet. The world hates Christ Jesus. It hates God. When Jesus came to his own, his own did not receive him (John 1:11). And the world hates those who love Christ; not only in tyrannical dictatorships like North Korea, where Christians cannot worship freely; not only in Islamic countries, where radical Muslims think they are serving god by killing Christians; everywhere. If you are a Christian, the world hates you. Scripture says it and our eyes see it. The current culture will try to persuade you and your children to reject God's word, by mocking you and intimidating you. If you are a Christian, you must walk in danger all the way.

But, dear Christians, do not be discouraged. Take heart. Christ your savior too walked in danger. He fled homicidal kings and hid himself from religious zealots ready literally to throw stones. And God kept him safe until the appointed time. Then Christ walked that dangerous road all the way to the cross. There is no suffering that you have or will bear that Christ has not already borne for you; in his soul and in his flesh. Jesus bore the blunt of this wicked world, with all its suffering and persecution. And he came out on top. Christ Jesus rose from the dead. No one could keep him in the grave. So although you may suffer in this world for your faith in Christ, you will also be glorified with Christ. Saint Paul says, "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us." (Rom. 8:18)

Christ didn't suffer in vain and neither do you. Your suffering does not earn you heaven. Only Christ's suffering can do that. Yet your suffering is a fruit of faith, which will ripen into glory on the Day of the Lord. Your suffering can remind you of Christ's suffering and his glory. Christ Jesus' suffering has made your suffering holy, so that in your suffering, you can sing,

My walk is heavenward all the way

Await my soul the morrow,

When God's good healing shall allay

All suffering, sin, and sorrow.

Then, worldly pomp, be gone!

To heaven I now press on.

For all the world I would not stay.

My walk is heavenward all the way.

Amen.