

The Other Cost of Christmas

Lesson: Matthew 2:13-21

Close on the celebrations of December 25 and The Nativity comes December 28 and The Day of Holy Innocents. Right in the middle of our joy and happiness, the Christian calendar reminds us that there are evil people like Herod in the world, and innocent children wind up paying the cost of their evil.

This is the story we usually leave out of Christmas. There are several explanations for why we discount this story. Matthew is the only one who tells it. But then, Matthew is the only one who tells about Mary's visitation and her song, and we don't ignore it. It doesn't fit the timeline for Christmas. It comes after the visit of the Magi, which would make it not so close to Jesus' birth. Other histories of the period tell a lot about Herod's evil and casual killings, but don't mention this event in Bethlehem at all. Do you realize how much of the NT history is not mentioned anywhere else? Early church history and worship included the flight into Egypt. It's not the flight that bothers us.

Are we trying to avoid this event for some other reasons? Does it disturb our sense of Christmas escape from the evil of ordinary time? From the directions of Herod's acts of casual killing, it was hardly worth mentioning. The massacre of a few babies in a small town was not really news. It was routine. But scripture and church history remembered it, and we should, too. Why? ...because it tells us the other cost of Christmas – the one we would just as soon forget.

Jesus was born into a world of evil, a place where justice was an exception to the rule, where mercy was only a cry of the ones who needed it, where resignation to evil gave people a sense of powerlessness against it. Jesus grew up in a world where people were used to the idea of children dying for no reason at all – except for their threat to someone's power or position or wealth.

The reason that the story was remembered and written down and became part of the calendar in Christmas worship for the church in earlier centuries is pretty simple: Children were still dying for the same reasons – their own children!

So, maybe we can see why we avoid the story now. By and large, children are still dying and for the same reasons – but they are not OUR children.

On Christmas Eve I said that all the tinsel and the presents, all the decorating and ornaments, all the cookies and candies – as much as I love them like you do – are NOT Christmas. They are all wonderful extras that we have added to the season for all kinds of reasons – some good – until they have become the reason for the season, instead of the reason for the season.

They named him Jesus, because he would save his people from their sins. Resurrection Sunday is the reason for Christmas Day. This table is for remembering that we live the saving good news of the resurrection every day because he was born and crucified and rose again, and they said it was a victory over sin and death. He came and is still with us to conquer evil – real evil that is really in the world and in us.

This story was put in text to remind us that God can't stop evil from doing some horrible harms. But God was willing to take on the evil and the suffering and the defeat to prove that Love is stronger than death, God is conqueror over Evil, and we can be more than conquerors over sin and death.

I've been a Presbyterian for almost 25 years now, and I love this church. I love our trust in a sovereign God and our peculiar way of looking at the Christian faith. But we need to re-form a fundamental flaw in our theology. It is a phrase we use to give us comfort, but it is a belief that is no comfort to suffering innocents.

I want us to stop saying "God is in control." In a world where children suffer and die, God is NOT YET in control. And God is crying with Rachel long ago over the death of children.

That phrase was born out of a time 1000 years ago when the church was in control and thought God was everywhere, and all knowing, and all powerful – because the church thought it was in control. They built cathedrals and told kings what to do at the threat of hell. Now we call those days "the Dark Ages." But we still like to think God is in control – especially when evil happens like 9/11 or some natural disaster like Katrina occurs. It is a way that we try to think that someone is still in charge in a world where things happen that defy our sense of justice and decency, much less our inclination to love and mercy.

No one in their right mind can say that God goes around slaughtering innocent children. People do that! Evil people do that. God does not want innocents to suffer, and God does not like it.

God cries over the cost of Christmas. Mothers in our world today have seen so much suffering that they are past tears. God still cries for them. When children suffer and die because of neglect and abuse and just plain old evil and casual killing – there is a sin in there somewhere. Jesus died to forgive that sin – but he died to tell us that we are sinners when we get accustomed and comfortable with the idea.

They kept the slaughter of some innocent infants in the story to force us to keep the birth of a savior and the death of innocents in close proximity. It helped them remember that every innocent death was a reminder that Jesus managed to stay innocent until evil was fed up with him and did what they had to do to end his goodness.

God wants us to do more than cry about the evil we can do nothing about. God wants us do something about the evil – the suffering and death of children – that we can do.

Albert Camus was famous as a writer, and one of the leaders of the movement called Existentialism. He was as an organizer of the French underground in World War II, and he saw Hitler as another Herod.

In the years following the war, Camus quit Christianity. In an address to some French monks, he said why, "I share with you your revulsion against the evil of the world, but I do not share your hope. And I refuse to submit to a world where children suffer and die."

At a table where innocence suffered and died, where a baby born to save us from our sins had to die to save us from our sins, how many of us look at Christmas in all of its hope, but we have lost our revulsion from evil? If we kept the manger and the sword a little closer together, would

we re-calculate the cost of Christmas and decide that we must refuse to submit because we serve the child who died and also lives to give us power for the struggle? This text reminds us that the places where the innocent suffer are closest to the manger and the cross, and they are the highest priority for Jesus in his earthly life and for us in our daily life.

The church is not good at prioritizing mission. We use the word “mission” to stamp any good idea of something someone wants to do – and especially the activities we are already doing or the causes that are good for us. By and large, the church has made its compromises with comfort and found all kinds of easier “missions” to pursue in order to avoid facing the deaths of children here and there, near and far – the suffering of the innocent by the abuse of a few and the neglect of many – sometimes including us.

It is interesting to me that abortion should be such a political issue in our society, but the needs and protection of children generally takes a back seat to more important things like cutting taxes. I know that people who oppose abortion have used this text to advocate for not-yet born children – maybe in appropriate and inappropriate ways. But I wonder why they do not also worry about the suffering of the children who are already facing evil and neglect and abuse. This text is bigger than politics: it is about the ways that the comfortable of the world will ignore the needs of children who might threaten their power, position, and wealth.

We don't have to be Herod to be closer to him than to Joseph and Mary. This text says that health care for children in the richest nation on earth is a spiritual issue more than a political problem. Let me put it this way: Where in San Antonio would a poor laborer carpenter like José and his wife Maria find medical care for their little baby named Jesus? He and all his working friends have no medical coverage. If we knew that baby Jesus was in some emergency room with a fever because his mother and father did not have insurance and there was no doctor who would see them, would we call our doctor? Would we run to the hospital room to make sure that a poor couple go for adequate care?

Where is the church that is telling a society that little Jesus needs to be safe and healthy – and maybe even educated? Where would churches be if they knew Jesus was in some emergency room with a high fever and no money? Would we complain about increasing number of homeless if we knew one family at Haven of Hope was on their way to Egypt?

A church is called to be a conscience to the world, and our strategic mission is to worry most about the issues that are closest to God. Holy Innocents is always close to Christmas, because the baby named Immanuel said children are closest to the kingdom of God. The baby we celebrate who becomes the life we live through this table said that children come first to God.

The least we can do in the new Christian year is commit our community to making every decision for the sake of the children among us, around us, in our church and in our city and in our world. If a congregation like ours is open about its revulsion of evil and turns its hope into a commitment to work for the future of children, it will be really attractive to a pastor who is a perfect match for that mission. Of course there are needs of the innocent that are beyond our powers, but there are needs of innocent children all around us where we can be the difference.

There is a hope in the power of the resurrection that some day love will win and Christ will rule over all. There is a power from this presence in this Lord's table that tells us God is at work in the world not-yet in love's control to save from sin and conquer evil. But this table is also a reminder that Evil is real and Jesus paid a terrible cost for the sin of the world. His birth did not end the cost of suffering for children. His death did not end the power of evil to inflict its pain. His resurrection did not give us an exemption from bearing the cost of evil and carrying on the task of overcoming its darkness with love's light.

There was another cost of Christmas, paid by innocent infants at the hands of evil and powerful people. And those babies remind us that there is a continuing cost to Christmas that we are all called to bear – the cost of faithfulness to Christ's life in the face of the evil we see, and a commitment to do what we can about the evil we can face.

We have this hope. We face this revulsion. We will pay this cost. We know in faith that God with us is God for us, that the baby born to save will save us all. We know that when we share in a life like his, we will also share in a victory like his.