

First Weekend of Christmas (RCL/A): "The Holy Family Flees, Rachel Weeps, and God Saves"

Matthew 2: 13-23

December 28-29, 2019

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan

Do any of you have tinsel on your Christmas tree? Do you know the story of **why** we put tinsel there? It has to do with the Holy Family's flight into Egypt, part of today's Gospel.

Legend has it that King Herod's soldiers pursued Joseph, Mary and the Child as they fled the slaughter of infants and toddlers about which the angel had warned Joseph in a dream. (A week ago on Advent IV we heard about a previous dream in which the angel encouraged Joseph, "Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife...." Matt. 1:20) The story goes that after a long day of hasty travel the Holy Family found a cave in which to spend the frigid night, so cold that frost coated the walls of the cave. A little spider saw the Child shivering and decided to do what he could do: he spun a web over the entrance to the cave, to act as a windbreak, to serve as a silken blanket to capture the warm breath of the travelers inside and insulate their make-shift bedroom with its chilly walls and floor of stone.

The pursuing soldiers saw the entrance to the cave and were getting ready to bust in and check it out when their captain stopped them and ordered them not to waste their time. He pointed out the crystalline, frost-coated web, stating that **OBVIOUSLY** no one and nothing had entered or exited for quite some time since the web was extensive and unbroken. Tinsel on the Christmas tree represents the icy strands of silk which that loving spider wove into a protective web.

There's also another beautiful legend associated with the flight to Egypt. The story goes that robbers and not soldiers were threatening the lives of the Holy Family as they sought safety in a foreign land. Traveling was dicey in those days, partly because of thieves preying upon unsuspecting caravans. Sure enough, a band of brigands singled out Joseph, Mary and Jesus as the next victims of their mayhem: robbery and murder. But one of the leaders of that crew of thieves, named Dismas, felt a connection to the Child who somehow captured his heart. The legend says that Dismas forbade the rest of his gang from harming the little family. He said to the Child, "O most blessed of children, if ever there come a time

for having mercy on me, then remember me, and forget not this hour.”¹ Does that name Dismas ring a bell? It’s the name tradition has assigned to “the good thief” who hanged beside Jesus on Calvary, the one who berated the mocking man crucified on Jesus’ other side, and who beseeched the Lord, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” (Luke 23:42)

Those are the sweet tales born of this Gospel filled with the horror of Herod’s murderous actions, the undying grief of parents whose children were killed in a bid to protect Herod’s power, and the pain of displacement of the Holy Family who left their home and became 1st century refugees, obeying God and preserving the life of the Child whose existence Herod was desperate to eliminate.

The contrast between the Christmas Gospel filled with heaven’s light and God’s love and holy birth and today’s Gospel about death and displacement is enough to give us spiritual whiplash. A week from Monday, January 6, is Epiphany, when we page backwards in Matthew’s Gospel and read about the wise men from the East who came to worship the King whose birth they had read about in the stars. They were Gentiles, pagans, and yet they **adored** the Child and gave Him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. They were warned in a dream **not** to tell Herod where they had found the Child and took an alternate GPS route home that **didn’t** take them anywhere near Herod’s palace. In today’s Gospel we hear of that same Herod, “Herod the Great,” the Jewish ruler who served the Romans but built the Second Temple, the most magnificent sanctuary of its time. Herod the Great is working overtime to expunge the Child whom He sees as a threat to his throne and a peril to his power. He wants to be sure the Child doesn’t escape, so he spreads wide the net to catch a King. He issues orders that every male child, 2 years and younger, living in the vicinity of Bethlehem, should be killed.

Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

*“A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled,
because they were no more.”*

Matthew 2:17-18 (cf. Jeremiah 40:1)

So many Rachels, weeping for their children, throughout history. In Jeremiah's scenario, Isaac's beloved Rachel, seen by some as the Mother of Israel, cries to see Israel's children marched off into captivity by the Babylonians, deported, never to see home again. We think also of black mothers in the 19th century, hearts breaking as their children stood on the slave block, auctioned off to the highest bidder, then dragged away, hands bound, to parts unknown. In the 20th century we see Jewish mothers whose children were ripped away from them during processing at Auschwitz, Cambodian mothers whose children disappeared into the Killing Fields of the Khmer Rouge, Rwandan mothers whose children were lost to genocide. In the 21st century, third world mothers still bury children who have died from lack of food, clean water, or medicine, Chinese Muslim mothers see their children removed to "reeducation" camps in Xinjiang Province, Latina mothers have been forcibly separated from their children at the border, and first world mothers bury children who have succumbed to addiction or been picked off by gang violence. War and natural disaster and disease take their toll, too, leaving many a "Rachel weeping for her children... refusing to be consoled."

The intro in our *Celebrate* insert says:

The birth of Christ does not remove the power of evil from our world, but its light gives us hope as we walk with all the "holy innocents" of past generations and today who have suffered unjustly.²

Our Emmanuel, God-with-us, was **born** for us and **died** for us. He is present to us in our suffering as well as in our joy. I don't think many of us would call ourselves "holy innocents," for we are well aware of our shortcomings in faith, our failures in love, our struggle to keep hold of hope. We're also aware there is more, always something more, we can be doing for those who truly **are** "holy innocents": those who suffer because of our fear of speaking out or because of our death grip on blessings intended to flow through us to others.

On the Christmas Day editorial page of *The NY Times* there was a photo of the Notre Dame Cathedral sanctuary in the aftermath of the April fire that set the "forest" of roof timbers ablaze, toppled the spire, melted 250 tons of lead and sent wood and stone careening down and littering the chancel

floor. In the picture the fire debris is piled almost as high as the Pieta, the Bernini sculpture of Mary holding her dead Son's body, newly deposed from the cross, against a backdrop of stained glass. "There will be no Christmas at Paris' Notre Dame Cathedral, the headlines read, the first such lapse in two centuries."³ Christmas **did** come, of course, although true, Midnight Mass wasn't celebrated in that space. Not that the Christ would have been ill at ease in the ruins. Christmas always comes. Destruction, evil, suffering, unfaith, can't negate the Birth or gut the Gift.

In *Letters and Papers from Prison*, written during his World War II imprisonment for his part in an assassination attempt on Hitler, Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer reflected on a 1513 *Nativity* painting by Albrecht Altdorfer, a contemporary of Martin Luther. Bonhoeffer writes:

The Altdorfer Nativity, which portrays the Holy Family at the manger amidst the ruins of a dilapidated house – whatever made him do that, 400 years ago, against all tradition? – is especially on my mind these days. Perhaps Altdorfer meant to tell us, 'Christmas can, and should be, celebrated in this way too.'⁴

It's like the Holy Family got a jump on their refugee status, hunkered down in an abandoned building, open to the elements, having no belongings, only each other and heaven's light shining upon them.

And so Christmas always comes, regardless of whether we're "prepared," undaunted by the condition of our hearts and of our home (if we have one). It comes to prisoners, to holy innocents who suffer, parents who grieve, threatened rulers who have no allegiance except to themselves, refugees who flee to find safety, and to holy hospitality teams who welcome them for a season or for a lifetime.

Dismas, that good thief who knew full well he was no "holy innocent," asked Jesus to remember him. The Lord responded from the cross, "*Today you will be with me in Paradise.*" (Luke 23:43) There is the Good News and our eternal hope: He came to save sinners, "like you and like me." Amen

¹William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew* (vol. 2, rev. ed., Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), p. 35.

²*Celebrate*, First Sunday of Christmas, December 29, 2019 (Augsburg Fortress).

³"No Christmas at Notre-Dame Cathedral," *The New York Times* (Dec. 25, 2019), A20.

⁴Deborah Smith Douglas, "The Poverty of God: Love in the Ruins," *Weavings*, XVI No 6, Nov./Dec. 2003, p. 11, quoted in Edward L. Poling's "Joy That Withstands the Darkness," Hagerstown Church of the Brethren, Dec. 16, 2012.