

January 21, 2024

Let us pray.

O God of Love, O God of Truth;

Let us say strong things gently and gentle things strongly.

Let us speak the truth in love to all

and love the truth that lives in each.

Let us hear the truth as we each need it and live that truth.

O God, we heed it through Jesus, Your Word & our Lord.

Amen.

### **Vulnerability - Its Own Kind of Birth**

*Matthew 2:16-18*

*“When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated. So he sent for his soldiers, ordering them to go to Bethlehem and kill any child two years old or younger. He had extrapolated how long it had been from the time he had first learned from the wise men about the rising of the star and the birth of a new kind of king.*

*Then and there, fate fulfilled what the prophet Jeremiah had spoken: “A loud wailing and great lamentation was heard from Ramah. It was Rachael, unconsolable and weeping for her children because they were no more.”*

The bible story we just heard  
hardly ever gets preached about -

***“The Death of the Innocents”.***

One reason is timing.

It doesn't quite fit into Christmas-time.

Let's face it, it's not the kind of story we see on a  
Christmas card, or hear in a Christmas carol.

Indeed, this story is as “UN-Christmas” as it gets!

Also, this story doesn't quite fit into Epiphany.

Epiphany is about the Wise Magi following the star  
meeting Jesus, and seeing in him “the light of God”.

This dark & repulsive story is as UN-Epiphany  
as it gets!

So it doesn't fit neatly into the Christian Calendar.

But there's also the history problem.

A slaughter as heinous as this, one would think  
would have made the history books, but “No”!

No secular historians write about it.

None of the other Gospels write about it.

Paul, Peter nor John write about it.

Not even James, Jesus' own brother.

No one outside of Matthew records it.

So historians dismiss it - and so do most preachers.

But I contend this story is timeless.

Its themes speak to every time.

And certainly, this story speaks to OUR time.

How many King Herods can we count in the world?

People - mostly men - who crave power like tyrants and consider innocent people as “expendable”, not thinking twice about using them as pawns for one person’s plans to gain or keep authority?

Lying, inflaming fears, dashing innocent hopes, trampling basic freedoms

are acceptable means to their King Herod ends.

Just ask yourself,

“How much paranoid pursuit of power resorts to over-kill - even total kill.”

Oh yes! My friends, this story is no fiction.

This story is fact. This story is real.

This story is found in the headlines of our times.

And this story,

more than almost any other in all of the N. T., is in sharpest contrast imaginable to the story of Jesus.

How do we evaluate power?

This is an issue for every society in every time.

It is the issue for every voter in every democracy.

How do we evaluate power?

It is the issue behind our support of corporations

who put profits ahead of people  
and run ads that make products look attractive  
when in truth they are toxic,  
and threaten the future of our youth.  
How do we evaluate power?

It is the issue for every individual,  
who finds themselves in an abusive relationship,  
having fallen in love with a person who is paranoid,  
narcissistic and jealous.  
Who uses you to do their bidding.  
Who fakes the appearance of kindness & reverence  
but does not live it -  
and you have the bruises to prove it.  
How does one evaluate power?

It is an issue for the definition of masculinity.  
Too many men embrace Herod-like traits:  
-celebrating revenge, using violence,  
needing to be “top dog”, “king of the hill”,  
and trampling on others is just fine to get there.

Yes, dear friends,  
the story of “The Death of the Innocents” begs everyone  
and especially every Christian - to ask,  
“How do I evaluate power?  
According to Herod or according to Jesus?”

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Clearly, Herod's handling of power is heinous & unholy. And clearly it is a far cry from the use of power by Jesus. Jesus never exploited others - especially the innocent. Jesus never had anyone else fight his fights, nor forced them to suffer.

Jesus turned worldly power upside-down, so that vulnerability was more powerful than strength, truth more powerful than lies, humble service was more powerful than greatness or praise.

For Jesus, the true power emanated from Love.

There couldn't be two more opposite moral examples in the world, than King Herod and Jesus Christ.

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The story of "The Death of the Innocents" is clearly so dark and dangerous, that it is hard for us to see it any other way than negatively. But there just might be an entirely different angle to it. One that actually makes it A BIRTH STORY.

In Matthew's Gospel, the word for "Wise" means "Shrewd". And shrewd is often the opposite of innocent.

In Matthew 10:16, Jesus says,

*“Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; therefore, be shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves.”*

In John’s Gospel, over and over,

Jesus warns his disciples,

*“Live in this world, but not of it.”*

And, in his great final prayer Jesus prays,

*“Father, the hour is come...I ask you to protect them from the evil one by sanctifying them in my truth.”*

Yes, this story in Matthew is named,

*“The Death of the Innocents”*, referring to innocent victims.

But could it also mean the end of INNOCENCE,

as in naivety, idealistic purity and childish thinking.

Behind this daunting story there is an important truth:

Far too often, people are victimized by their own innocence.

Innocence must die for the truth of Christ to be born.

*“Be innocent as a dove”* preached Jesus.

Many Christian parents take that to heart,

doing everything they can to safe-guard

their children’s “innocence”,

filtering out the spiritual pollution of the world,

intervening in classrooms, in sports, in friendships

to protect their children

from any heart-ache and suffering.

The city of Ramah, where Rachael wept,  
means “high place”.

Geographers think it might have been a fortress place.  
And many Christians think creating a life above it all,  
and building a fortress for their family  
to keep out the wickedness of the world  
is the “Christian” thing to do.

My sister in law, every time she sees our children,  
says, “**Oh! They’re growing up too fast.**”  
And certainly, the so-called, “Hurried Child”  
is a kind of parenting, fraught with dangers.  
But sooner or later,  
all children have to live and act like adults.  
Sooner or later, childhood innocence must end,  
for Jesus commands us to

*“Live IN THIS WORLD, but not of it.”*

Therefore, He called his followers to be shrewd.  
Shrewd is the opposite of innocent.  
Shrewd means seeing evil where it lives,  
and learning how it works, what it looks like,  
where it dwells - essentially being fore-armed  
so as to avoid it.

One of the great problems in our society right now  
is not seeing evil - not seeing where it dwells

and IN WHOM it dwells.

And so, many fall victim to its slithering, seductive serpent-like ways.

“*Shrewd as a serpent.*” recommends Jesus.

Yes, “serpent” - of Garden of Eden fame.

What Jesus is suggesting for his followers is that they bravely face evil head-on and faithfully.

And for that to happen, innocence must die.

Let’s face it, Adam and Eve, in their innocence were exceedingly coax-able victims.

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In closing,

one of the fundamental issues of spiritual counseling is confronting and overcoming issues of childhood: childhood wounds, childhood belittlement, childhood neglect, childhood abuse.

Rich Rohr, in his great book *Falling Upward*, calls this “necessary suffering”.

And it reminds me of the story of the little boy who found a cocoon one day.

As he watched it, a small opening appeared, and a butterfly began struggling to squeeze through.

So the fellow decided to help the butterfly.

He took a stick and widened the hole to make it easier.



Soon the butterfly emerged,  
but its body was swollen and its wings shriveled up  
and soon it died.

What the man, in his kindly innocence didn't realize,  
that the butterfly needed to struggle through it's birth  
in order to be strong enough to live in this world.

We humans may not be much different!

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Pastoral Prayer - Jan. 21, 2024

Psalms 65 states, "God alone is my rock, salvation & fortress. I shall not be shaken. Trust in God at all times, O people.

*Pour out your heart before God.  
God is our refuge."*

Let us pray for the earth, the church and all in need, saying, "God of grace, hear our prayer."

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We pray for the leaders of the nations, that wisdom and integrity will prevail for the good of all. We pray for regions torn by conflict, that peace may reign and living may be the enterprise of construction rather than destruction.

We pray for the many diplomatic efforts to achieve a cease-fire in Gaza, that food and humanitarian aid may reach civilians in desperate need.

We pray for lessening of conflict in other countries, that refugees from war may be protected.

*God of grace, hear our prayer.*

Our prayers are for all people of faith.

For harmony and unity in the blood of Christ.

That divisions might not turn people away from church.

We pray for Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists and Jews, that wherever prayers are raised up, You, the one true God, will hear.

And for all people who nurture life  
in the name of the greater good.

*God of grace, hear our prayer.*

We pray for our nation - the president, the congress,  
the Supreme Court and all judges, for state, city and town  
governments, for school boards and councils,  
and all who have power to make policy;  
that all considerations may be given to what is most healthy  
for people and creation.

*God of grace, hear our prayer.*

We pray for all in need:

the hungry in our communities and nation and world,  
for those who have no home,  
for those who are justly or unjustly imprisoned.

We pray, especially, for all LGBTQ persons in Uganda,  
unable to seek medical care for fear of reprisal.

Be with those in our own land and around the world  
who are not valued for who they are.

*God of grace, hear our prayer.*

We lift before you, O God,  
those on this church's prayer list:

With thanksgiving, we remember those who have shaped us  
in your ways, O God.

In Jesus' name, we offer our prayers. Amen.

*Hymn # 594 Dear Lord and Father of Mankind*

## Offering

Let us open our hearts and share our possessions,  
so that the church's work is made strong  
for the sake of this needy world.

## Doxology

### Prayer:

Bless in every way, O Lord, the gifts of these people.  
Enrich the ministries of your people  
and make us grateful to be able to let go of things  
we ultimately do not own. Amen.

## HYMN # 214

“Rock of Ages, Cleft for me”