

Message Delivered at Christ Church
Wednesday, December 28, 2011; Feast of the Holy Innocents
TEXTS: Jeremiah 31:15-17; Revelation 21:2-7; Matthew 2:13-18
Delivered by Paul A. Johnson

This past weekend was the largest Christmas celebration we've ever had here at Christ Church. About 2400 people were here for the four Christmas Eve services. People searching for something...

Don't know what it was like for you, but I'll tell you I saw a bunch of beautiful things here on Saturday evening...proud grandmas and grandpas watching their grandchildren sing; a bunch of youth—all friends connected through their neighborhood and connected through Christ Church—worshiping together, sitting off to the side here; a congregation of young and old, standing outside around the cross at the late service, singing "Silent Night" and sounding like angels.

Those are a few of the sweet images for me from Saturday night. Maybe you have your own sweet pictures...from that evening, or from your own Christmas celebration.

And now today is the fourth day of the Christmas season—a feast day in the life of the Church called the Holy Innocents. And we get a different picture of Christmas...or, more accurately, the rest of the story. This is the part of the Christmas story that never gets included in the Christmas pageant. Matthew 2:12 is where the Wise Men depart home. Matthew 2:13 is where today's reading begins. The angel who visited both Mary and Joseph to ask something of them, now tells them what's next...it's time to get out of town. The Magi have come and gone, and duped Herod in the process, and he's mad. It's a dangerous thing to make a fool of a tyrant. Evil doesn't mind a fight, but it can't stand to be mocked and laughed at. So Herod is on the move, and taking matters into his own hands.

Into Egypt the Holy Family flees. And the children left behind in the area of Bethlehem...well, you've heard the story. Kindly enough, Matthew refuses to recount the details.

Quickly is the pastorate of our crèche scenes blown apart by the sharp edges of the world. They are the first martyrs. Thirty years before Mary will weep for her child, scores of mothers and fathers weep for theirs. They did nothing to incur the wrath of Herod. They are simply children...innocent. But evil is too often merciless and unreasoning; and so like tyrants before him and tyrants after him, Herod gets his way, no matter the cost. And so caught in the crossfire of the war between the Kingdom of Man and the Kingdom of God, their lives here are taken from them by a worldly king playing by the world's rules who decides to take upon himself the fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy. Sometimes, God fulfills God's prophecy. Sadly enough, in this case, humanity fulfilled God's prophecy.

Christmas is a festival season, but even still—sometimes there are stories that rightly call us to repentance for a bit, if not on our own behalf then on behalf of the human race. This is one of them.

...to repent of the culture of death we have created, where lives are discarded so easily.

...to repent that there are still children who go hungry, or who know not even minimal medical care when there is so much food and we argue over whether the Democrat's or Republican's health care programs is better...

...to repent of how often we turn Christmas into something that is only sweet, and too easily forget that it leads to a cross. Got to hand it to Herod...he certainly was a bad guy, but he understood better than most what was going on in Bethlehem, and who Jesus was and what he meant. Otherwise, he would have let him be.

...to repent of those times we have convinced ourselves an act of kindness was too small, when no such act is ever too small.

In the midst of Christmas cheer, this day reminds us of what is at stake. God, the Son, arrived in human flesh to overturn the tables and bring a new Kingdom. And the old Kingdom won't go quietly. And we aren't bystanders, but are in the thick of it.

May we honor Jesus this day by weeping for the children of the world who live in places we'd never be caught dead in. We inevitably walk into places of darkness. That is part of what we do as faithful followers. May we honor Jesus by bringing to those dark places we'll be in today the Light of his Kingdom. There is evil in the world. May we honor him by standing fast against it...through the power of the Spirit, we can. And may we honor him by choosing for life rather than death, in big ways and in small.

And if it seems too big a thing to be this way to honor him, may we do so to honor these holy innocents.

I'd like to finish this morning with this prayer written for Holy Innocents Day by Shane Claiborne, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, and Enuma Okoro. Let us pray: Lord, receive our prayers of tears and sorrow over those children consumed by a world that holds no regard for them. We pray for children left hungry and thirsty, left to fend for themselves on the streets, left to be abused by poor, twisted souls. Lord, in your mercy receive our prayers of intercession for children around the world. Amen.