

Matthew 2:13-18
"Grieving in Hope and Faith"
The Holy Innocents, Martyrs

December 28, 2025
Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, West Salem, Wisc.
Pastor Peter Adelsen

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen! Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

"And [Joseph] rose and took the Child and His mother by night and departed to Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I called My Son'" (Matthew 2:14-15).

The days on our Church calendar following Christmas Day can leave us wondering: where has the joy of Christmas gone?

What happened to "Joy to the World"? What happened to "Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled"?

These days following Christmas are very strange. Just one day after Christmas was the Festival of St. Stephen, Martyr. Two days after Christmas was the Festival of St. John, Apostle and Evangelist. And that leads us to today: the Festival of the Holy Innocents, Martyrs. It has been said St. Stephen was a martyr for Christ in both will and deed. St. John was Christ's martyr in will, but not in deed. And the Holy Innocents, to which we observe today, were Christ's martyrs not in will, but in deed.

This is so very strange. Again, just a few short days ago, we were gathered in unbridled joy. But now? Today, we heard of the death of children. Now we are gathered in deep sorrow. Instead of singing "Joy to the World," we are crying out to God about rescuing us from ***"the hand of the wicked"*** (Psalm 71:1, today's Gradual), and from the strangers who ***"have risen against me; [the] ruthless men [who] seek my life"*** (Psalm 54:3)

Then in today's Gospel lesson, we heard of crying and deep sorrow. For the mothers in Bethlehem, they are like Rachel before them as they refuse to be comforted because their children are no more.

The pendulum of our life together in the Church has swung drastically since Christmas Day. But this is what life is like out there as we live in a fallen and sinful world. One minute you are living your life in joy, and then the next minute is filled with sorrow.

Just look at Bethlehem. At the announcement of the birth of the Christ Child, there were angels singing in the fields: ***“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom He is pleased”*** (Luke 2:14). Upon hearing this, the shepherds run to see the promised Savior of the world.

Sometime later, wise men came from afar to Bethlehem to see the one ***“who has been born king of the Jews”*** (Matthew 2:2).

Then Joseph, as solid and reliable as a husband and father could be, is warned by an angel in a dream that his family is in immediate danger, and he doesn't waste a minute. He, Mary, and the Christ Child depart before morning to Egypt.

To be sure, there was so much joy happening in Bethlehem! But then, in the blink of an eye, there is sudden and unexpected death.

“Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, ‘Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw His star when it rose and have come to worship Him.’ When Herod heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him ...” (Matthew 2:1-3).

Herod the Great was well known for his social concern and at the same time being cruel and merciless. Herod during a time of severe economic hardship gave back tax money collected from the people. And during a great famine, Herod melted down various gold objects in the palace to buy food for the poor. He built theaters, racetracks, and other structures to provide entertainment for the people. And he began the reconstruction project of the Temple in Jerusalem.

But as I said, Herod was also cruel and merciless. Herod was known for being incredibly jealous, suspicious, and afraid for his own position and power. For Herod, any potential threat would be dealt with. He had his wife's brother drowned. He had his wife Mariamne killed. He had her mother killed. He had three of his own sons killed. And shortly before he would die, Herod had the most distinguished citizens of Jerusalem arrested and imprisoned to be executed the very moment he would die and just to guarantee that there would be mourning in Jerusalem. If not for him, it would be for those men. But there would still be mourning.

So, it is not far-fetched that when Herod was troubled, then all of Jerusalem would be troubled right along with him.

As the magi wandered around Jerusalem attempting to locate *“he who has been born king of the Jews,”* the people began to be concerned.

Knowing the past, anyone even suspected of doing Herod harm or threatening his position or power was in considerable danger. In Herod’s sweeping carnage many innocent people were often destroyed. Although Herod’s anger was not vented this time against Jerusalem, it would soon be vented against the nearby town of Bethlehem.

I wish I could say that sorrow is only unique to Bethlehem, but I can’t. The slaughter of children two years old and younger by Herod is unique. But not the deep sorrow. That’s what makes this time of year so hard for many.

Yes, just days ago, we sang “Joy to the World,” but what happened when that service ended? You either went home or spent time with loved ones, your family and friends. But some of us had people missing from this year’s gatherings – and not because they couldn’t make it because of other gatherings or travel distance – it was because they died.

Last Christmas, or some Christmas before, you were spending time with those whom you love: opening presents, talking and eating, singing, and going to church with them. But then, something sudden happened. Something unexpected happened. Something happened to take them away from you: a car accident, a fall, a heart attack, a stroke, cancer. You name it. It happens. Suddenly and unexpectedly, death happens. And now, this Christmas season, you join yourself with those grieving parents in Bethlehem.

Now, deep sorrow is bad enough, but when you are shaken to the core, it’s the questions that drive us nuts. It’s those questions that hurt the most. They range from the simple “why?” to the more complex “Why did this happen? Why did God allow this to happen? Why doesn’t God hear my prayer? Why does God allow suffering? Has God abandoned me?”

Sometimes, there are clear answers to the “why” questions. Like in our Old Testament lesson. There, God told them directly to love and worship Him only. What did Israel do? They refused. They turned their hearts away from God. They worshipped other gods. And for their idolatry, for their sin of unbelief, they received and suffered a consequence: 70 years of slavery, suffering, pain, and death at the hands of the Babylonians.

Also, in our Gospel lesson. There, the “why” is answered because Herod feared losing his power. He was also furious that the magi did not return.

However, other times, there is no clear answer to our “whys.” Sometimes, there is not a clear cause and effect that we can easily point to. All we can point to is that we are poor, miserable sinners who live in a fallen world, which gives suffering, pain, evil and death. This is the world we live in thanks to Adam and Eve’s disobedience. **“Sin came into the world through one man (Adam), and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned”** (Romans 5:12).

And for those “whys” that lack an answer, Jesus teaches us this: **“In the world, you will have tribulation”** (John 16:33). So, trouble is to be expected. Trouble is now considered normal.

Sadly, as we live in this fallen world of sin, suffering, pain, and death happen all the time. And in just a blink of an eye. One moment you are driving down the road and the next moment a truck turns right out in front of you.

Sometimes, we just don’t have the answer to the why question. We still wonder. We wonder where God is in all of this?

On this day of the Festival of the Holy Innocents, God gives us real hope for real people in the midst of sorrow.

Remember: **“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life”** (John 3:16). This is why **“the Word became flesh and dwelt among us”** (John 1:14). He came down into this fallen world to bear our sin and be our Savior. He came to save those Holy Innocents and He came to save you!

And nothing can stop Jesus from accomplishing that goal! Herod certainly tried. He tried to kill Jesus, but Joseph followed the command of the angel. And some years later, a son of Herod – *one who lived* – would attempt to prevent Jesus from going to the cross. But nothing can stop Jesus from accomplishing His goal! Jesus would finish His course. Jesus would cry out: **“It is finished”** (John 19:30).

Then, in the blink of an eye, Jesus would bodily resurrect from the dead! And because Christ lives, we – by faith in Him – will live also! For everyone who looks on the Son and believes in Him has eternal life, and God will raise him up on the Last Day! In Christ alone there is truly joy to the world!

Until that day of Christ's final coming, you and I will grieve, but our grieving is mixed with hope as our tears are mixed with faith and our sadness is mixed with joy knowing that in the twinkle of an eye, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall all be changed as our bodies become immortal (1 Corinthians 15)! In Christ alone, there is true joy! Merry Christmas! Amen!

*The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding,
keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.*

+ SOLI DEO GLORIA +