

The Holy Innocents

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

Rev. Jason Glombicki

December 30<sup>th</sup>, 2018

There is no getting around it, today's gospel is horrific. It seems like an odd reading for the Christmas season. It appears to be a poor choice to read it on a baptism Sunday. It seems like a reading that we'd want to hide under the carpet and pretend it doesn't exist. No matter our feelings, it's here for us to hear. It's here for us to wrestle with today.

The first thing to wrestle with is the historical accuracy of this reading. In the Eastern church, they remember 14,000 child deaths, the Syrian church honors 64,000 children, and many medieval authors say 144,000 babies. However, historians living at that time of the massacre didn't record this event. With that in mind and given the Bethlehem was a small town, most contemporary historians agree that *if* this slaughter occurred, it was likely that the death toll was around twenty young children. Regardless of the historical accuracy or the body count, this story is characteristic of Herod the Great.

You see, Herod's actions are well-recorded. He drowned his sixteen-year-old brother-in-law, the high priest; he killed his uncle, aunt, and mother-in-law; and he had his two sons killed along with over three hundred officials accused of siding with his sons. When Herod felt threatened by a change to the status quo, he would often lash out and work to eliminate what he feared. It's easy for us to see how different we are from Herod. After all, I'm going to go out on a limb here and say that no one here has ordered infanticide. I'd also guess that most of you haven't killed a number of family members. The harder thing for us to realize is how similar we are to Herod.

You see, like the innocent children slaughtered by Herod, children are still one of the most vulnerable populations in the world. Children don't have the same capabilities that adults possess. They don't have direct means to influence politicians to create policies that impact their development. So, when it comes time to trim the budget, often the things that are changed include funding for the environment, education, housing, and healthcare. These things have a direct impact on children's development. The World Health Organization reminds us that children are constantly growing. In proportion to their weight, Children breathe more air, consume more food, and drink more water than adults. Children have developing nervous, digestive, reproductive, and immune systems that when introduced to toxins can lead to irreversible damage.<sup>1</sup> However, children are often unaware and unable to make

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.who.int/ceh/risks/en/>

necessary choices to protect their health and avoid maltreatment of all types – including, emotional, psychological, sexual, and physical. Maltreatment in early life not only impairs development but it also impacts future job opportunities, increases the likelihood for victimization, and broadens the chances of turning to dangerous coping mechanisms and risky behaviors.<sup>2</sup>

So, when you and I do not take children seriously enough to create and enact policies in all levels of government, schools, churches, and public places, we become complacent and we are obligated to right our wrongs. For we know that children are impressionable and they are easily used for profit. Across the globe, 11% of children are forced into labor. So, instead of going to school, they make cheap clothing to support our insatiable appetite to shop and get the best deal. And, instead of putting them in a place to make sustainable job transitions in the future, children are forced to work in agriculture.

You see, the very thing we wish to condemn is the same thing we indirectly support. At the same time, if we speak up, we fear how we might need to change. We fear needing to give up commercialized Christmas. We fear the need to pay more for clothing. We fear changing what we've become comfortable doing. So, we, like Herod, continue to harm young children across the globe and in our own city to keep our comfort, power, and privileged.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/violence-against-children/en/>

And, that is why we need to hear the full story. We need to start with reality. We need to see how our actions and inactions impact our children. Then, we need to gather at the font. We need to take seriously the confession we made during Everett's baptism where we confessed that we renounce our own participation with the powers that undermined God's purposes – our actions and inactions that draw us from God. For, the first step in making a change in coming to terms with reality; then, we can commit to overcoming the powers opposing God's will, and, finally, we can respond by bringing God's will on earth.

And, that is what the Christmas season is all about. Yes, it's about a baby born 2,000 years ago, but it's more than that. It's about how we become the midwives for God and how we help to birth Christ among us here and now. We have children among us killed by pollution, border agents, and hunger. And, we can be the light to the vulnerable "Christ child" by being the voice for safety and life. We can be like the magi who give hope and possibility for true life. We can help to birth the children of Christ here and now for a future that is unfolding.

And there are many ways to do that. We can support policies that emphasize peace, education, and children. We can be mindful of who makes our produce and products. We can develop relationships with the children in this church so that we might care for them, support them, and mentor them as they grow. For, Christ is here, among us, in Everett, in Henry, in Olivia, in Natalie, in Zoe, in Silas; in children on the

southside, northside, and westside; in children in Mexico, Canada, and across the U.S.; in children in shelters, in homes, and in mangers.

So, friends. There it is. We heard a horrific story and, in that story, we find disgusting truths about ourselves. Yet, we also have a God who loves us, who comes among us as a vulnerable child, and who reminds us that today a child a born. And, with today's fresh start, we have a chance to love, cherish, and mentor that child. Today, we have the opportunity to be the midwife for God's peace, the opportunity to cradle our future salvation, and the opportunity to birth Christ among us. Merry Christmas, my dear friends, and Amen.