

HOLY INNOCENTS

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on the Festival of Epiphany, January 7, 2018

Lectionary Reading: Matthew 2:7-23.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Significance of Childermas

Is That It Is the Day That Jesus Became a Refugee

In 33 years as a pastor, I'm doing something right now that I've never done before. I'm preaching on a passage and a topic generally ignored or avoided. December 28 or 29, depending on the Roman Catholic or Orthodox calendar, is the relatively minor holiday feast day called Childermas. In the same way that Christmas is Christ Mass, a mass celebrating the birth of Christ, Childermas recognizes children, but specifically the children who were massacred by Herod. The significance of it comes from one line I read years ago, where it said, "The significance of the day is that it is the day Jesus became a refugee."

Imagining the fear that Jesus' parents must have experienced, the Bible says that Joseph was warned in a dream about Herod's intention to kill male babies two years old and younger. But in a day prior to mass com-

munications, how would one know, if you lived in Bethlehem, that such an order had been given? A rumor would likely spread that a male baby would grow up to become King of the Jews, and he would usurp power from Herod. The word would spread one family at a time, and hopefully it would spread faster than Herod's goons could move from house to house. Learning of the decree, one person telling another, do you fight? No, you cannot outweigh the forces of evil, so you either hide or flee, and Joseph and Mary chose to flee.

Get Down on Your Knees

if You Want to See the Grotto of Christ's Birth

In the holy land for a tour in 2005, I visited the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. Down in the basement of that church is the grotto for the Nativity, and nearby is another grotto for the Holy Innocents, a church and a grotto memorializing that event, as recounted in the Gospel of Matthew.

The one in the Church of the Nativity is very touristy and very orthodox. So down you go, and you stoop through a doorway, which is literally no more than four feet high, so that you have to get down almost on your knees to get through this doorway, and then you descend some marble steps. If you can imagine the marble steps, they're not at all level, having been worn away at every step by millions of people. Take these steps all the way down, and you find the air in orthodox churches is almost impossible to breathe because of loads of incense and multifarious candles.

Eventually you come to a grotto where there are brass lanterns and candles dripping everywhere. Heavy curtains drape the walls, and you come to a space against the wall, opulently decorated, and you look into one small spot that's like a glorified fireplace. That space is ringed in brass and gold and marble, and then inlaid on the floor there is a brass or gold star, about six to eight inches across.

You're told by the tour guide that's the spot. That's it. That's the actual place where Jesus was born. Of course it isn't, but you suspend credulity for a moment, and it's like wow, that's the spot, and you want to stop and venerate the scene, except that there's the pressure of other people, who want their two seconds in front of the scene as well. And so you stop, and you look at it, but then you'd really better move on because there are a hundred more people coming to look at that spot.

Watch Out for Flim-

Flammers Among the Holy Innocents

In a different church but very close to the grotto for the Nativity is the grotto for the Holy Innocents, which is completely different in character. Once again, you descend, but into a subbasement below the basement, and it's hewn into rock. All the rock has been painted white and so have the floor, the walls, and the ceiling; it's all white. There are three or four rooms, and in the central room is nothing more than a very small table with a white linen tablecloth and two candles. Carved into the walls, hewn into the solid rock are spaces that could hold, say, a small couch. We are told by the tour guides that's the place where the babies had been laid.

There are some facts about this story in Matthew that are important to recognize. One of them is that absolutely nobody mentions this story except Matthew. Nowhere else in the Bible, nowhere else in any other literature, Christian or non-Christian. The only other place where it's mentioned is in documents that trace their lineage to the Gospel of Matthew, so not Josephus, not anybody. Furthermore, some scholars suspect that the lack of supporting backup is what's called a "contrived fulfillment of prophesy." That is, some people are trying to link Jesus to Moses because this story happened with Moses as well, the reason Moses was hidden in a little basket in the

Nile and found by Pharaoh's daughter. They're trying to make that linkage in the Gospel of Matthew. Perhaps flim-flammers are supporting a specious story to make it look as though Jesus was a second Moses. So that's one side of the story.

The other side of the story is this. I wouldn't put it past Herod to give out such an order. Get a load of this: He murdered three of his sons; he murdered his mother-in-law; he murdered his second wife; he murdered his brother-in-law; he murdered what is estimated at 300 military commanders. And as well, he murdered an unknown number of Pharisees; they didn't bother to count because they were not as important as the military commanders. But you can bet it was more than 300. So would he give out an order like this? You tell me.

Hagiography Inflates

the Countdown of Holy Innocents in Bethlehem

The population of Bethlehem at that time is estimated to have been around 1,000. So once again, estimate-wise there were probably around 20 children, male, two years old or younger and maybe another dozen in the outlying areas. In a process of what is called hagiography — that is, making something holy or making it holier — the Byzantine liturgy lists the number of babies killed at 14,000. Hmm. That's difficult in a town of 1,000. The Syrian list of saints bumps it up

to 64,000, and a Coptic, an Egyptian list of saints has it as 144,000.

The Bible mentions that "A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel weeping for her children" It's a touch problematic because all of Rachel's children survived her. She died in childbirth giving birth to her second son Benjamin. And so the best guess is that Rachel was considered a mother of the nation, in much the same way that Sarah, the wife of Abraham, was. The children who are no more might have referred to the children of Israel, many, many of whom may have died in the exile in the deportations in their history.

One other fact to add to the mix is well-known in psychology that, of all the griefs human beings may bear in their lives, pretty much the death of a child is without parallel. It's like the worst one.

Why Are We Looking

I Ask Myself and You to Answer the Day's Q&A

What I asked myself to think about on this Sunday morning is why we're looking at this notion, this story that's happily ignored in our scriptures. Who in their right mind wants to preach on two grottos, the false story of the Nativity and the killing of babies? I haven't wanted to do that for all of my career, but something snapped this year, and I thought this might be the time to look at it.

What I'd like to ask you to do, on the other hand, is to think about those two grottos because there's a powerful urge that we have as human beings to memorialize things, especially negative events. We have Pearl Harbor, and within a decade a memorial was built on top of the sunken Arizona. Then we have 9/11, and in about a decade or so after that, we have those two blackish fountains memorializing the spot where the towers were. Even in our own front yard, we have an official New York State plaque recognizing Peterson's Tavern because on this spot, town fathers figured things out for the layout of the great city of Binghamton.

And so also that grotto for the Holy Innocents.

Memorializing something, recognizing it that way can also divert our attention. According to the World Health Organization, in 2000-2010 forty-five percent of all child deaths, age five and younger were attributable to malnutrition — one of the easily solved problems in our world. There is enough food. Here I am telling you about this, and I am 30 pounds overweight. Fifteen thousand deaths per day for children under five. When I read that estimate of 20 male babies of two years or less killed in Bethlehem by Herod's order, what immediately came to my mind was Sandy Hook, six teachers, 20 kids.

In the United States, there are now 25 million homeless children, that's one in 30, and 15 million below the level of poverty, that's one in five in the richest country in the world. For that Grotto of the Nativity, that

real fancy fireplace, the actual spot, they said! The actual spot!

What I would suggest is that you rather have this in mind:

O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend
to us, we pray;
Cast out our sin and enter in; **be
born in us today.**

Here are two lessons from this difficult passage in scripture:

1. The world is still a harsh and brutal place for children.
2. The second lesson is an antidote for the first lesson. That is to recognize the real actual spot. The real spot. Christ within, born in us today, in communion with our soul.

These lessons are not just of Christmas but also of Childermas.

An Editorial in the NYT

Upended the Close of My Sunday Sermonizing

That was to be the end of my sermon as of last night. This morning I received a very helpful and hopeful reminder, a *New York Times* editorial by Nicholas Kristof. The title of it was: "Why 2017 Was the Best Year in Human History."

Oh? At a New Year's Eve party, talking with a gentleman who shall remain un-

named, and said to him, “You know, I don’t mind watching 2017 go but am not ready to thumb my

nose at it nor am I going to shed a tear either.” And he said, “Well, not me.” That’s the way he felt about 2017. So I have that in mind while reading this title, “Why 2017 Was the Best Year in Human History.”

Rather than distracting me with idiotic tweets, Kristof goes on to say that “2017 was better by virtually every metric. The number of people living in poverty dropped significantly. The number of people dying from hunger, including children, fell meaningfully. The number of people dying or blinded or crippled by any number of diseases went down substantially in 2017. Literacy rates worldwide went up. The percentage of kids in school and the raw number rose. Virtually every metric of well-being for humanity in 2017 was better than 2016, and 2016 was better than 2015.

The previous ending to my sermon is still true. Christ is within us; the world is still a brutal place for children. But also, there is profound, statistically proven reason for hope.

Amen