

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

January 3, 2020 (2nd Sunday after Christmas)
Matthew 2:13-23

I'm reminded of a hymn:

O little town of Bethlehem, How still we see the lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep The silent stars go by;
Yet in thy dark streets shineth The everlasting light.
The hopes and fears of all the years Are met in thee tonight.

That's the way we picture Bethlehem: quiet, still, peaceful. It matches the way we think about CHRISTMAS. It's like a dream.

Ten nights ago, we gathered to sing and celebrate. We told stories about a baby—a baby who would save the world, a baby whose birth was greeted by angels, a baby whose birth meant tidings of great joy for all people everywhere. We spoke of God WITH us, in a cute, cuddly little baby. It was dreamy.

But THIS MORNING, in the SEASON of Christmas, I'm thinking of OTHER angels. I'm thinking of the nearly 350,000 souls we've lost this year to Covid, in just THIS country, who were looking FORWARD to Christmas, but will never OPEN their presents.

"A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more." This last year, this pandemic, and all the loss it has brought us – loss of lives, loss of income, loss of security, loss of community, ALL this loss is a stark reminder of WHY this world NEEDS a savior.

How can we celebrate Christmas in the midst of SO MUCH TRAGEDY?

Well, I know of a person who, a few years ago, spent Christmas in Germany. It was a family event: He and his wife invited along their three married kids and their spouses.

It was the first week of December, and there was a perfect blanket of snow. They went to Munich, and they joined hundreds of people at the public square for the tree lighting. It was beautiful.

Then someone suggested that Dachau was just a few miles away. They thought about it and debated whether they wanted their lovely Christmas holiday to include a concentration camp, where so many Jews and others had been incarcerated and killed. But opportunities like that don't come along that often, so they decided to do it.

It turned out to be an unforgettable experience on a cold, bitter day. The barbed wire above the stone walls, the guardhouses, the foundation outline of the barracks. And on down the long road, the furnace built to exterminate people.

Being in Dachau at Christmas helped them realize the harsh truth that it wasn't so perfect that FIRST Christmas either. There was a Herod, and there were soldiers, and there were people murdered — children, every child in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under.

A child had been born who would one day be king, and Herod wasn't going to give up his throne without a fight. As writer Frederick Buechner so beautifully put it, "For all his enormous power, (Herod) knew there was somebody in diapers more powerful still."

Jesus ESCAPED the slaughter, but it WAS part of the Christmas story. The city that had just cradled life and hope became, by the actions of Herod, the HORRIFYING home of DESPAIR and DEATH.

The scriptures are realistic about the human condition. There IS evil in this world, even in the Christmas story. We'd rather that this story of the slaughter of the innocents were not in the Christmas story. But it is, because that's the kind of world we live in.

Some of you remember the TV show M*A*S*H. For those of you who don't, M*A*S*H portrayed a group of Army medics and their battalion dealing with the heart-breaking challenges of the Korean War. In one episode, the battalion is all set to celebrate Christmas when they receive a new patient, a severely injured soldier. And the doctors' deepest fear comes true – the soldier dies on the operating table.

Now although it goes against his ethics, one doctor writes the incorrect time of death in the medical records. This allows them to tell the soldier's wife and children that he died on December 26th. The doctor justifies his actions by saying, "No child should have to connect Christmas to death."

EVERY PARENT would AGREE with that statement. "NO child should have to connect Christmas to death." But, whether we like it or not, death IS connected with Christmas.

The Christmas story isn't only about miracles and angels and answered prayers; it's also about loss and heartbreak and tragedy. Just before Christmas, we gathered for a longest night service. It recognized that for many of us Christmas is NOT a time of joy; it's a PAINFUL reminder of what we've lost – the loss of a loved one, of a job, of hope, of peace, of purpose. Together we HONORED the pain that we'd been hiding and we offered it to the Christ-child. Bethlehem looked a little more REAL THAT night.

The scriptures remind us, though, that evil NEVER, NEVER has the last word. Senator John McCain told of a Christmas Eve in 1971 when he was a P.O.W. in Vietnam. There had been Christmas services for the prisoners before, but they had always been stage shows, orchestrated by the Vietnamese for propaganda. But for Christmas 1971, the prisoners finally got permission to hold their own services. McCain was designated chaplain by the senior P.O.W. officer.

The officer requested a Bible, but the guards only let McCain keep it for a couple minutes to copy some verses, then they took it away. Using those few verses, he led the service. The prisoners sang some carols from memory, and as they sang, some of the men began to cry, but not from sadness. This is what McCain wrote about it: "Suddenly we were 2000 years and half a world away in a village called Bethlehem. And neither war, nor torture, nor imprisonment, nor the centuries themselves had dimmed the hope born on that silent night so long before."

Evil NEVER, NEVER has the last word. The GREATER truth about the "Little Town of Bethlehem" is expressed in THESE lines, "Yet in thy DARK streets shineth the everlasting light. The hopes and FEARS of all the years are MET in thee tonight." The MIRACLE of Christmas is that God comes to us where we ARE — in Bethlehem. Not just in the PERFECT little town of our dreams, but more importantly, in the NIGHTMARES.

It may be not the Christmas story we WANT, but it IS the Christmas story we need – because any God who isn't willing to come to HEROD'S Bethlehem, won't do us much good. If the Christmas gospel has nothing MEANINGFUL to say at the bedside of your dying spouse, or in a M*A*S*H unit, or in a prison camp, then it doesn't REALLY have anything meaningful to say at ALL. And any theology that can't be preached in the presence of parents grieving over their slaughtered children, isn't worth preaching anywhere ELSE either. If God is going to save us, God has to come to where WE ARE, in the REAL world.

Today's reading from Hebrews says that Christ "did not come to angels" but to real people living in real places. Not to angels, but to US. In Bethlehem. If Jesus is truly God with us, then all the pain and heartbreak and tragedy that is part of OUR story is part of HIS story. THIS is the world he was born into — to SAVE it.

Evil NEVER, NEVER has the last word. Mary and Joseph were forced to flee, but they knew it was only for a time. The promises of God concerning their Son were sure. God would NOT FORSAKE them. And SOON they RETURNED with Jesus to Nazareth to build NEW lives – lives that would CHANGE the world forever.

This is a SCARY world, in MANY WAYS. This last YEAR, we've been SHAKEN from the DREAMY SENTIMENTALITY of Christmas. But TODAY, we're reminded that Christmas NEVER

WAS about a cute, CUDDLY baby in a manger; it NEVER WAS a DREAM; Christmas is about the one who was BORN to SAVE us from NIGHTMARES. Amen.