

Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saint James the Apostle / Bogue, Pennsylvania
First Sunday after Christmas (A) 2007
30.xii.2007, 10:00 a.m.
Holy Eucharist, ELW Setting 5
Isaiah 63:7-9; Psalm 148; Hebrews 2:10-18; Matthew 2:13-23

J. J.!

Grace to you and peace from Him Who is and Who was
and Who is to come. ✠ Amen.

*"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."*

--[Jeremiah 31:15] Matthew 2:18

The Bible, as written witness to God's Word, speaks of
everything. The Holy Scriptures speak of all that pertains
to God and the World, to the Creator, the creation and all of
the creatures in it. The Sacred Page describes the beauty
and majesty of creation and the exaltation of the human
spirit, the image of God unfolding toward the Infinite. But

the Biblical witness also speaks of the unspeakable, of mindless violence and of sin committed by those called into covenant with the living God and enlightened by divine law. Just as Christ, who had no use for money, was not ashamed to speak openly about human greed, so the proclaimed Word of God is not ashamed to speak of that of which *we* ought to be ashamed. In today's Gospel, Saint Matthew the Evangelist proclaims the Word of God by speaking of the unspeakable. If it is possible you have not noticed what that is, let me direct your notice to verses 16, 17 and 18 of this second chapter of the First Gospel: King Herod's slaughter of the innocent infants of Bethlehem.

We might not notice at first glance or first hearing that the unspeakable is in fact spoken of in today's Gospel. Why? It is because we have become accustomed to what is spoken of there, to what Herod did out of jealousy and fear

and for his own convenience. It has become an unspoken custom among us not to speak of such things, though they happen daily and hourly. In all branches of Christianity in our country except for the Catholic and Orthodox Churches and for some, but by no means all of the fundamentalist sectarian groups, the wholesale slaughter of human infants stands at the very top of the list of those things about which we are seldom to speak in private and never to hear addressed from the pulpit in public. It is a conspiracy of silence on account of which the witness and teaching of Scripture and the Apostolic Church sounds with deafening clarity.

Scholars debate about the extent or even the facticity of Herod's slaughter of the innocents of Bethlehem. Since Matthew's Gospel makes the parallel between the true identity and calling of Moses and the true

identity and mission of Jesus so clear, some Biblical exegetes regard this parallel to Pharaoh's slaughter of the Hebrew male infants in Exodus as a literary device. Others have attempted a kind of arcæological demographics and have concluded that, even if the story is rooted in some historical event, the total number of infants murdered cannot have been very great, based on estimated population density, average life expectancy, and so on. But the community and Gospel of Saint Matthew the tax collector, the disciple, the Apostle declares clearly and forcefully that if, in the year of Our Lord's birth, you and your child lived in or near Bethlehem, and if your child was two years of age or younger, its life expectancy when confronted with the power of a paranoid king was exactly nil.

It was not the first time this had happened and, heaven and earth both know, it would not be the last.

According to Saint Matthew and his Palestinian Jewish community of believers in Jesus as Messiah, as the Christ, it *did* happen to those little ones, anonymous to us but known at least by family name within the Matthean community. According to the faith and love of that community, they deserved to be mentioned and to be remembered. Thus it was that the purge ordered by Herod *was* recorded in the second chapter of the Gospel named for Matthew.

The event was summed up by citing the Prophet Jeremiah, that witness to the degradation and utter destruction of Jerusalem on the day of *Tish B'av*, the day of the Babylonian conquest. 'Rachel,' personifying every Jewish mother, was seen to weep for her children. The captives of Jerusalem were assembled by their Babylonian captors at Ramah in Benjamin before being marched north

and east to Babylon. There Jeremiah the Prophet recalled the Rachel of Genesis, weeping inconsolably because she was childless, now a spiritual Rachel, the mother of the whole nation, weeping because her children and the possibility of future generations was being taken from her. The Babylonians and their great kings had indeed built a high civilization on the basis of a culture that was already ancient when they inherited it, but *this destruction* is that for which they are remembered. Herod the Great did indeed accomplish many great things for the Jewish people under Roman rule—helping them to maintain at least some semblance of independence, tremendous public works projects, the greatest of which was the rebuilding of King Solomon’s Temple—but he is remembered today for *this*, and for the violence and corruption that led him to murder

members of his own family and which finally led them to murder him.

The Scripture speaks of all things and of *these* things. Why does the Church, or at least *our* church, seem to be so silent here? No one wants to see a return to the days of back street abortionists for the poor, with ‘safe’ clinical abortions only for the rich, or the days of girls who are still children themselves terrified into silence by boyfriends, parents, clergy and law enforcement, butchering themselves and their unborn children in fear and in filth. But, as a society we have avoided our responsibility for life conceived without a plan for parenting and nurture by simply sanitizing the back-street abortion, legalizing what we refuse to face whether in a hospital or a clinic or in a room to let over a bar. Who are we kidding and what are we thinking?

Do we really expect anyone, let alone Almighty God, to believe that we, as a nation of tremendously resilient communities, do not have the intelligence or the humanity to raise and nurture the children born to us? Have we really fooled ourselves into thinking that we cannot afford to raise children, that it is cheaper in the long run to murder our future by the hundreds of thousands annually, and that it is best to keep quiet about it? It seems to me that these are the choices we have made, and that we send our young people this message loudly and clearly. No wonder they comply and do just as they are expected to do in their tens of thousands each day. What have we become and what are we becoming?

But what if we did what Saint Matthew's community did? What if we sent another message to our youth about the life of those who are the most defenseless

among us? What if, instead of enacting more laws worse than the ones we already have, our church and our society set an example of *reverence for life*? What if we dared to *mourn* the lives of those millions that have been taken and will be taken in all legality and, perhaps, with the health of the mother in mind? What if *we* dared simply to grieve for them with those who loved them, *including many of their mothers who lost them because they were expected to*, including their Maker and Redeemer Who most certainly loves them with an everlasting love? What if *we* remembered the voice that is heard every day in the Ramahs of our land, Rachel weeping inconsolably for her children because they are not?

If we took that one, bold step, we might take other, bolder steps. We might, like Pennsylvania's own Milton

Hershey, find a way to protect and to *celebrate* the life of every child we can.

There are two sweet little children, a brother and a sister, living in a mobile home not far south from here. There is not a thing wrong with mobile homes or the people who live in them, and this one happens to *be* home for these two, the home a loving and very resourceful mother has made for them. But the crushing and catastrophic burden of the father's illness leaves these children at the short end of life week after week. There must be a better way for them and we, with others, can be part of that way.

There is a young gentleman of six years in Red Lion whose mother and grandmother love him dearly and so much that it almost makes up for the father who turned his back on mother and child. His mother is proud of the job she has done in raising him, as she should be, for she has

done this despite a severe back injury, a horrible industrial accident at work that severed four of her fingers *and* the fact that she has been deaf from birth. Through the deaf ministry and casework management of Lutheran Social Services, and directly through gifts of clothing and toys from this congregation, we are becoming part of that child's future, just as we have been for scores of children we have helped through the leadership of Red Lion teacher Paul Kuhn in the past. We have been and will, continue to be involved in the lives of children others have chosen to forget. It seems to me that we can also advocate for those our society chooses to forget before they even receive a name. ✠ Amen.

Now to Him Who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood, to Him be glory and dominion



with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever.

✠Amen.

Gloria in Excelsis Deo!