

Sermon Text for December 29, 2024

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Jeremiah 31:15-17 and Matthew 2:16-18

“Jesus is born”

This is our third time together to look at this sermon title: “Jesus is born”. We are 2,100 years removed from the birth of Jesus and yet even today we have to be aware of the impact that his birth has on our every day lives. We looked at last Sunday that when we say Jesus is born we are proclaiming the most important and fundamental message that is the Gospel message, that Jesus in his birth saved us from our sins. That is why he is called Jesus because in his birth we find God giving us a chance to live for him without sin. We come gathered here this morning as sinners who have been washed clean in the blood of Jesus so that our sins would no longer be accounted against us. This is the message of Christmas, this is the message of Jesus is born, the most important message.

But Jesus is born also has secondary messages as well. When we say that Jesus is born we saw on Christmas Eve that it demands a choice from us. We can say that Jesus is born and like Herod translate that into fear and paranoia that someone is trying to change our life into something that we might not want. I like my life, so I’m just going to push back and live my life the way that I want, not the way that God wants, and every now and then I might do something good or have a little bit of faith and that should take me over the finish line. We saw that Jesus is born forces us to choose between going on as if nothing has happened in our life and maintain the status quo, like Herod, or like the wise men worship the true king and go home transformed.

I have never preached from this passage before. It is an easy one to skip over, full of gore and violence and anger and bloodshed. Today Jesus is born and the political reality in which he lived brought about a violence that some of us might think is unrealistic and nothing that would ever happen in this day and age. The political reality in which we live, much live the reality in which Jesus and his family lived, necessitates that we push back against all that which takes us away from righteousness. When we do that we will find ourselves diametrically opposed to much of that which is accepted in the world today. Let’s read about Jesus is born.

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Our Scripture today more than most puts us squarely in a historical reality that is mentioned in many different historical sources. You may not be a big history buff. Your eyes may glaze over when I talk about days and years and who was alive and who was fighting when. But humor me for a bit if you would. We know about when Jesus was born because of this

Scripture and the historical figure of King Herod. We know that King Herod died in 4BC, which means that Jesus could not have been born in year 0 as some of might think.

We know from vs.16 that this slaughter of the innocents took place at least two years before Herod died. So that places Jesus' birth, this whole Jesus is born sermon series, somewhere between 7 and 6 BC. It is vital for us to understand this whole incident within a historical framework, and also within a clear political structure which surrounds the events that took place. We often spiritualize the events that happen in Scripture and try to understand what impact they might have on our faith. Today, the events that take place in Scripture ought to have a political impact on us as well. How do we live our lives and what do we support and how do we ensure that we are pursuing righteousness in all that we do, and not just in our own spiritual walk with Jesus. Jesus is born has an impact on our cultural, social, spiritual, yes, but also our political reality.

We find King Herod who figures out that he has been deceived. The Greek word is the same that is used for when Jesus is on the cross and the guards mock him as he is hanging on the cross. So the sense is that certainly King Herod felt like he was being mocked by the wise men as they did not return to tell him the news of the Jesus is born. As a result of this event Herod is furious, we read in Scripture. We aren't making any of this up, this actually happened. What you do not know is that you should not make Herod angry, because he had a very clear tendency to violence.

Historically Herod is known as one of the bloodiest rulers in history. He clung to his throne tenaciously and would not allow anyone to threaten it. To the point where he had his wife, Mariamne, killed because he considered her a threat to his throne. He had his two sons Alexander and Aristobulus killed in order to protect his throne. He included in his will a proviso that when he died all of the families of the region were to kill one of their sons as a sign of respect for his death. This all happened before Jesus was born, so what do you think is going to happen if you mock Herod, or betray him? This is like right out of a game of thrones episode, and the result is what you would expect. The slaughter of the innocents.

As a result of Jesus is born Herod turns to that which was most comfortable and familiar to him, violence. He kills all the boys in the region of Bethlehem who were 2 and under. Historically it is thought that the number would have been between 20-50 babies. It is a direct correlation to what happened around the time when Moses was born, and Pharaoh demanded that all baby boys be thrown into the river, which is why Moses found himself in a basket in the Nile. Herod acted out what had been done earlier by Pharaoh.

The Scripture from Jeremiah that we read is used by Matthew to lift up the tragedy of the event as a fulfillment of prophecy in the birth of the Messiah. Rachel we know died while in childbirth in Genesis 35, read the chapter and you will see that Ramah is a region right before Bethlehem, and so again historically and geographically this is correct. The interesting point is that Jeremiah tells Rachel to weep no more because her children are coming back after one of the most brutal and bloody times in the history of Israel, after the exile into slavery.

But here Matthew uses this Scripture to depict a weeping Rachel who cries because her children are no more. When Jesus is born prophecy is fulfilled, but let's be clear, this prophecy is not the will of God. God does not want the babies to be killed, but our actions make it happen, not God's will or desire. We can't superficially resolve this tension between God's sovereignty and human free will. The atrocities that humans commit in defiance of his will do not negate the responsibility that we have in our sin.

There is a mixed bag historically in relationship to our understanding of bloody rulers. Joseph Stalin was one of the most vicious, bloody rulers of all time. By his policies and by his hand he was single handedly responsible for the death and starvation of between 6 and 20 million people during his rule in the Soviet Union. While we were in Russia there was a poll taken and they asked the general population who do you admire the most in regards to previous rulers in Russia. Over 70% said Joseph Stalin.

History can reflect the actions of certain leaders, but not all interpretations will be the same. For some power makes right, even if it comes at the cost of millions of lives, even if it comes at the expense of the voiceless being even further marginalized. There is a lot of historical grief that seems to be taking place around the birth of Jesus, which is not very dissimilar from our own current political reality. We cannot imagine living in a society where the death of all the children under 2 be slaughtered, and that would be a normal thing.

But we do live in a world where that happens on a daily basis. The war that is taking place in the Middle East we see babies and children dying at the hands of IDF at a rate that would make Herod blush, make him look like a rookie. Today in the Sudan millions of women and girls are facing violence and horrendous acts against them on a daily basis due to the conflict in that region. This has been happening since April of 2023. But here we are most of us completely unaware of it, because politically it doesn't have any impact on us. As followers of Jesus Christ our responsibility is not just to our own spiritual well being, but to all those who are suffering under the violent hands of rulers. Just because the slaughter of the innocents is not our

reality, does not mean that violence should be normalized around the world because it doesn't impact us.

You see, when we say that Jesus is born it has more than just a spiritual impact. It demands more than a choice between good and evil. It demands that we act in righteousness which will always find itself at odds with all political impulses. Our current political system in our country is a clear example of that. We have one political party whose slogan is make America First, which is so contrary to a Gospel that tells us that the first will be last and the last will be first and that we are to be servants to all. We have another political party that has forgotten that what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ is to live according to righteousness which means following God's commandments in all things, and not just in the Matthew 25 things. We live as followers of Jesus embedded in a society where the Herods are within our reach.

We are confronted with a choice that only the church is able to reflect. We must be willing to pursue righteousness even in the face of violence which might be directed at us. Once again, clearly, the Gospel demands decision and necessitates a division between those who accept and those who reject the message. The results of Jesus is born will show up when we see evil consistently at odds with Jesus and his mission.

When Jesus is crucified we find the culmination of evil attempting to bring him down. But this conflict really began at Jesus birth, in the work of Herod and others who required that things remain as they are so that we can pursue our own thrones. In this passage the plan of God is unfolding. Those who are allies to his plan, but also those who are enemies to his plan find themselves immersed in history. Nothing happens by accident, but not all that happens is God's will. Jesus is born, bring him glory and honor and righteousness. Amen.