

**Sermon for January 3, 2016 (Christmas 2, Year C)  
Offered by Nathan Ferrell at The Episcopal Church of Saint Mary**

Texts: Jeremiah 31:7-14; Psalm 84:1-8; Matthew 2:13-23

Title: The Holy Innocents / What to do about Herod

*Still rage the fires of hate today, and innocents the price must pay,  
while aching hearts in every land, cry out, "We cannot understand."*

(These words come from a hymn for the commemoration of the Holy Innocents. And they leave us with the perpetual question:)

[My friends]: What are we to do about Herod?

This King Herod crashes down right in the middle of our Christmas celebration, and he brings with him his terrifying reign of violence and bloodshed.

Why? Why must there be a Herod to interrupt every one of our celebrations?  
And what are we to do about Herod?

On December 28 of each year, the Church remembers the slaughter of the Holy Innocents. This is one of our forgotten and overlooked commemorations, since it comes right after Christmas and in the middle of a vacation week.

I think it is ironic that our current calendars do not permit a robust remembrance of this tragedy.

I say ironic, because our society has undertaken such great pains to remove death and pain and suffering from our everyday lives.

Just think about it:

We have flooded our population with pain-killing medications.

We do not want the needs of our elders to interrupt our lives, so we put them away in homes to be cared for by professionals.

When people die, we no longer take care of the bodies and clean and dress them in our living rooms, in our parlors. Now we call the professionals and have them take the dead away as soon as possible.

Usually, when that happens, all we get back nowadays is a small box of ashes – cremains they are properly called – in a clean, small container.

Let's face it: the only place where we like to see death and pain and suffering in our time is on TV or in the movies. But never, ever in real life.

We do not actually observe the commemoration of the Holy Innocents, so I changed the Gospel reading for today.

You see, on this second Sunday in Christmas, verses 16, 17, 18 of Matthew's second chapter are always left out – skipped over! – so that all we get is the Holy Family's flight to, and return from, Egypt.

The reason, I suppose, is that we already did this story on December 28.

But do you know what I think? I think they are left out, because we do not want the reality of death and pain and suffering to interrupt our Christmas frivolity.

Keep those uncomfortable things safely and cleanly contained on December 28 – even though no one pays attention that day!

We are obligated to remember the Holy Innocents of Bethlehem.

We will do it, but let's not bring them out into public view.

If only life were that simple, right?

But this story from Matthew's Gospel reminds us of the truth:

Life on this planet earth is incredibly complex, and life and death are always intertwined in an inseparable bond.

Let's go back to the story for a bit and look at it in more detail.

There are at least FIVE different layers at work when we read this story of the Holy Innocents.

1. The story of Rachel, the beloved wife of the patriarch Jacob, who died in labor while giving birth to Benjamin, and who is referenced by the prophet Jeremiah.
2. The story of Pharaoh, the archenemy of the Israelites, who ordered the death of all male Hebrew children in Egypt.

3. The story of the exiles who were oppressed by the King of Babylon and dispossessed from their ancestral lands, which is the cause of Rachel's weeping in Jeremiah's text.
4. The story of the Holy Family fleeing in search of safety due to Herod's desire to crush any potential competitor for his throne.
5. The story of our own day in which unprecedented numbers of human beings all across the earth are fleeing in search of safety due to violence, tyranny and oppression.

What are you and I to do about Herod?

We need to know at least a bit about the original Herod.

This is important, because the shadow of Herod looms over all of the Gospel stories and it lingers in the background of everything that we can say about the life of Jesus.

Herod was a Jew. He was born around the year 74 Before Christ and his father was a high-ranking official in Idumea, just south of Judea.

Ambitious from birth, Herod earned an appointment as governor of Galilee when he was a young man. By supporting the various leaders of Rome, he was eventually awarded by the Roman Senate with the title of "King of the Jews".

Through bloody battles and sinister deal-making, he finally won control over all of Judea in the year 37 BC and so began the Herodian dynasty.

The House of Herod was established.

Because he licked the boots of every Roman emperor, Rome allowed Herod to rule his kingdom with an iron fist.

He was King of the Jews, and he made sure that everyone knew it!

He had coins minted for his realm which bore the title: "the kingdom of Herod".

Every potential rival for his throne was eliminated, including three of his very own sons! Because of this, Caesar Augustus famously remarked that it was safer to be one of Herod's pigs than one of his sons! As a Jew, of course, Herod did not eat pork! But he did kill his own family, if he suspected them of possible treason.

When Matthew's Gospel reports that the Magi came to Herod and asked, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?" (Matthew 2:2) you can be certain that Herod must have erupted in rage!

Who would DARE to usurp that title which he had won for himself by hard battle and effort and sacrifice? Anyone who tried to take it would be killed.

Truth be told, we don't actually know if this horrible incident in Bethlehem took place. Matthew's Gospel is the only record of it.

We DO know that Herod would not have thought twice about it!

As his own death approached, the historian Josephus stated that Herod was so concerned that no one would mourn his passing, that he commanded a large group of distinguished men to come to Jericho, and he gave an order that they should be slain by the sword on the day of his death so that the whole region would be filled with grieving mourners. Thankfully, Herod died and his children refused to carry out this command.

I know that this is a dark and sad story, and that we all want to sing a few more happy Christmas carols before we have to let them go until next December, but this is part of the Christmas story as well – and it needs to be remembered.

Life and death are always intertwined in a complex story.

And it makes me wonder:

Do you think that Jesus knew about these deaths in Bethlehem?

Of course, the Gospels tell us that he was an infant when the slaughter took place. And the Holy Family was not present when it happened.

But did Mary and Joseph hear about it? And did they tell Jesus about it when he became older? And if so, what did they say? And how did he feel about this?

About dozens of young boys being killed because of him?

Did he struggle with survivor's guilt?

And how did he not grow up to be entirely bitter and angry toward Herod?

Not seeking revenge against Herod for his evil brutality?

When we consider what to do about the Herod's of our day, how can we learn from our Lord's teaching and example?

What are we to do about Herod?

The House of Herod is long since gone, but the bitter effects of tyranny and oppression will always be with us.

Herod thinks that, by killing every threat to his rule, his reign will continue and he will gain glory and honor for himself and his family.

But he is sadly mistaken.

Pope Leo the Great, Bishop of Rome in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, once famously preached about this story and directed his words straight at every single Herod:

“The fear that racks you, Herod, is wasted; in vain do you try to vent your rage on the infant you suspect. He, whom you do not wish to reign in Judæa, [already] reigns everywhere!”

My friends: what are we to do about Herod?

Resist him, we must. And strive always and ceaselessly to protect the innocents.

But Christ already reigns everywhere, even in this complex world of life and death.

Thanks be to God that WE do not have to fix this world, or even to save it.

With trust in that reality, we are free to sing – and rejoice – and to pray!

Please bow your heads as we pray this collect for the commemoration of the Holy Innocents:

“We remember today, O God, the slaughter of the holy innocents of Bethlehem by King Herod. Receive, we pray, into the arms of your mercy all innocent victims; and by your great might frustrate the designs of evil tyrants and establish your rule of justice, love, and peace;” In the name of Jesus Christ, the great Prince of Peace, we pray. May it be so. Amen.