

28 December 2003
Holy Innocents

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Holy or Herod?”

Text: Matthew 2:13-18

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Christmas went by this year and the birth of Jesus went unnoticed by many. The birth of Jesus went unnoticed by many that first year in Bethlehem as well. But know that this event did not go by unnoticed by Satan. When your enemy enters the battlefield in flesh and blood, it is time to fight. And fight he did. And so the color of our paraments today is the color of blood, as we remember those babies whose lives were taken in Satan’s effort to extinguish the life of his enemy, the life of Jesus, as quickly as he could.

Now for this job, Satan did not make a personal appearance – he very rarely does! He instead used a trusted friend, a man he could rely on, someone he had used in the past with great success – and that was good old King Herod! According to a famous historian who lived at the same time as Herod, he was a “monster.” He killed one of his wives, along with her grandfather, her mother, and a brother-in-law, not to mention three of his own sons. He later burned some Jewish scholars at the stake, killed two more of his own sons and also 300 people who supported these sons. All-in-all, he put to death a great number within his own royal family and court, leading Caesar Augustus to say of him, “It is better to be Herod’s pig that his own son.” . . . Here was a man Satan could rely on!

And so a little while after Jesus was born, *after* Mary and Joseph move out of the barn (or cave) and find a place of their own; *after* the shepherds have come and gone; the three Wise Men came from the East, and tell King Herod they are looking for “the one who has been born king of the Jews.” King Herod plays nice to these uninvited but very helpful guests, and then sends them on their way, as in his heart, the plan has already been devised. Find out where the child is, and kill him. There’s only enough room in this town for one king of the Jews. But when the Wise Men never return to tell him where the child is, his paranoia begins to kick in, it must be a “vast right-wing conspiracy” against him, and so he’ll show them! They want to play with Herod? They want to save the life of some meaningless child? Then I’ll kill ‘em all! And he orders the slaughter. Every male child in the region, two years old or under, get rid of ‘em. Every one. No exceptions. . . . And after the deed is done, Herod sleeps soundly in his bed, satisfied

that another threat to his reign has been put down . . . and unnoticed once again is the young family, now on the road to Egypt, with the strangely young baby boy, and loaded down with gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Satan failed. His enemy was still alive. The battle would have to last another day. And so Satan continued to rage against Jesus, in the desert, in the cities, in the countryside, all the way to the cross, where Satan delightedly stood by as he watched Jesus bleed out; as he watched Jesus cry out in forsakenness; as he watched his enemy in flesh and blood die. Finally die, at the hands of other trusted allies! . . . And after the deed is done, if Satan had a bed, he would have been sleeping quite soundly in it, satisfied that another threat to his reign had been put down . . . not even hardly noticing that just a short time later, that tomb was empty . . . until his enemy, his enemy in flesh and blood, his enemy that he had *watched die*, appeared in his bedroom! In his very own house, in hell! And proclaimed victory! That He was not dead, but alive! Jesus was alive! His enemy was alive! And he had failed again.

And so not one to give up, Satan continues to fight. To fight against Jesus and try to kill Him. But since He can't kill Him in flesh and blood – since once you die and rise again you cannot die again – he is now out to kill him in us. He is out to kill Christians. He is out to kill our faith. And as he had found some trusted friends to help him out in the past, some people he could rely on, some folks he had used in the past with great success, so also today he uses those allies. And who are those “monsters” today? Hitler? Saddam Hussein? Osama bin Laden? Yes, certainly. But also a friend that hits very close to home. A friend who has infiltrated our defenses and who we listen to quite readily. And that is the sinful human nature, the little Herod, that lives in each one of us.

Because in your heart, there's only enough room for one king, and the little Herod in you, your sinful nature, wants to be that king. You want to be in charge of your life. You want to have the last word. You don't want to be told what to do. And if there's another king who comes along and lays claim to you, to your heart, to your personal autonomy, then He's got to go! . . . That is the natural desire that lives in each of us. And don't you think Satan is using this friend to his advantage? Telling us that we'd be better off without Jesus. Convincing us that sin isn't so bad. Patting us on the back when we're more concerned about our children's happiness than about their salvation. Urging us to enjoy all that life has to offer, because you'll be forgiven anyway. Surely Jesus will understand. . . . And that sinful nature in us purrs its consent, and wallows in those wonderful, flattering words, and says yes, yes! I am in charge, I am the king . . . not even noticing the smile on Satan's lips as he tiptoes away from our hearts and leaves us sleeping soundly in our sins.

Sleeping soundly . . . as 3,250 pre-born babies are again slaughtered each day in abortion. Sleeping soundly . . . as our friends and neighbors continue on in their unbelief. Sleeping soundly . . . as we think we're doing pretty good, satisfied with ourselves.

But once again, Satan will not be victorious. Because it is not only that sinful nature, that little Herod, that friend of Satan, that lives inside of you, but also a new man, a Christ man! A man **“born not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but [born] of God.”** (John 1:13) And this new man, born of water and the Spirit in Holy Baptism is no friend of Satan! No, he is the wise man in you who worships the child in the manger. He is the man in you who has died to sin and has been raised to a new life. He is the man in you who lives in Christ and Christ in Him and so with Christ has his heel on the devil's head! He is the man in you who feeds at the Lord's table, eating and drinking that body and blood Satan so badly hates! He is the man in you who knows that **“man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”** (Matthew 4:4) . . . That man is not in you by nature, but by the grace of God. The Father who sent His Son into this world for you, and sent His Son into your heart for you, that you might be His own. And so you are. You are not by your deeds, which are wicked – but by faith, by which you are forgiven. For by faith in the Christ, born on Christmas, crucified, but now risen and alive, you also have won the victory over Satan. And Herod – whether the wicked king of the Gospel history, or the wicked man that lives in us – is unable to win or prevent the work of the Saviour. ***The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it.*** (John 1:3)

And so we prayed in the collect earlier for God to *“destroy in us all that is in conflict with Him.”* Destroy it in repentance. Drown it as we remember our baptism. Starve it, as we feed the new man with heavenly food. That we might live as “holy innocents.” Holy not by nature, but by forgiveness. Holy in Christ.

Some think that putting a commemoration such as this so close to Christmas is “un-Christmassy.” This is the time to be joyful, not to remember such deeds as these! . . . But that is wrong thinking. We should not pity these little martyrs, but envy them. For these children, circumcised on the eighth day after their birth, counted righteous and holy and “innocent” in God's eyes by virtue of their faith received in this Old Testament sacrament, are the lucky ones. Spared the fight. Spared the sorrow of this world and now living in Paradise. And the Church knew that it was exactly for these that Christ had been born. And so in its wisdom, the Church, in putting together the Church Year, placed not one but three martyr's days immediately after Christmas! December 26th is the day of commemoration for St. Stephen, a martyr in both will and deed. December 27th is the day of commemoration for St. John, a martyr in will but not in deed. And December 28th is the day of the Holy Innocents, martyrs not in will but in deed.

And these days are here that we might know the true meaning of Christmas. The true reason for the season. That we might have hope. That we might see in the example of these martyrs our own lives, and know that however we die – whether in youth, as the Holy Innocents, or in old age as John, or in the prime of life as Stephen – that we have hope because of Christmas. Because of the child lying in the manger. Because this child came to lay down His life for us, and take it up again, that when our lives are taken from us, He may take them up again. That Satan may once again be defeated and fail and wail in torment, when he finds that he has not killed us after all, but that we have been rescued and taken home to Heaven.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.