

30 December 2007
Christmas 1

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Merry Christmas?”

Text: Matthew 2:13-23; Galatians 4:4-7

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

There is not much joy that surpasses the birth of a child. There is not much sadness that surpasses the death of a child. We have celebrated the joy of Christmas birth. Today, the sadness of death intrudes. The Holy Innocents, they are called. All the baby boys in Bethlehem two years old and under. Run through by bloodthirsty swords at the order of a fanatical king named Herod who would do whatever it takes to keep his throne – whether that meant killing family members, friends, or even little children.

Perhaps it would be more “Christmassy” to ignore this story . . . or at least talk about it some other time. But no. The church always proclaims the brutal reality of the truth. For only the truth about our sin and the truth about our Saviour can give us the hope and joy that we crave. And so today, sin intrudes on our Christmas story. The “Silent Night” we sang about just a few nights ago is broken by the sound of soldiers marching boots, the wailing of Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, and the gleeful laugh of the tyrant king who thinks he has gotten rid of another rival. Not exactly a Hallmark moment.

But why are we surprised? Has not satan always been at work in this way? Seeking to devour Christ and His church? From Eden to Bethlehem to today, his track record is consistent. As soon as the light comes into the world, he tries to snuff it out. As soon as the life comes into the world, he tries to end it.

And from your own life you know that this is the way things are. The idealized and sentimentalized Christmas of the world is just not reality. Joy one day is met with sadness the next. One day you are filled with faith and the next you are filled with doubt. Love you thought would last dries up, friends betray you, and your strength turns to weakness. Because satan does not cease to attack. Those little boys in

Bethlehem were attacked simply because they resembled Christ; and that is why you too are attacked. For by faith connected to Christ, and robed with Christ and His righteousness, *you too* are the enemy. The “Little Town of Bethlehem” of greeting cards and carols becomes the latest “ground zero” in Satan’s terrorist attack against Christ and His Church.

And yet, of all this, St. Paul proclaims to us in Galatians that all this happened “*in the fullness of time*” – which is another way of saying *at the perfect time*; the time when everything came together, in God’s plan of salvation. And here, Satan enlists his tried and true ally, a traitor in our midst, our sinful nature, to help him in his assault and get us to doubt our Lord and His promises and His love, and so kill the faith in our hearts. For how could this be the perfect time, when everything seemed to be going wrong! A pregnancy before marriage, then taxes and a census, a difficult journey while *very* pregnant, no good place to stay, and now a death sentence issued against this child, and a flight into Egypt? **With perfect timing like this, who needs bad timing?**

And Satan whispers in your ear, “*See? I told you so? There’s no “Joy to the World!” Then or now. Look at your life. Look at your Christmas. Not what you thought, huh? Forget about it. Forget about Him. It’s not worth it.*”

But dear brothers and sisters in Christ, do not sell your birthright for that bowl of porridge! Do not buy the myth of a perfect Christmas or perfect life and so miss the Christmas and life that Christ has come to bring for you. For what our world calls Christmas is but a cheap copy of the original; their joy but a glimpse of the true joy of Christ; and the peace on earth that so many seem to strive for this time of year a poor substitute for the true peace that Jesus will establish between heaven and earth, between God and man. The peace that comes only through the forgiveness of our sins, and our adoption as sons of God. For this is the peace, joy, and hope that *transcends* the problems of this world and life; that doesn’t ignore them, but sees us *through* the struggles; that enables us to see God not as the source of these problems, but the One who has come to (as we pray) *deliver us from evil*.

And so while it might seem unfair and appear that the baby boys of Bethlehem died in order to save Jesus – that they gave their blood that He might escape – it actually was the other way around. He will give His life and blood for them – not to Herod, but on the cross. That though they are no longer cradled in the arms of their mothers, they be cradled in the arms of God. That though they seemed to die, yet

really now they live! A life even greater than the one they lost. A life that cannot be cut down in youth or old age, but the life of an eternal Christmas with their Father in heaven.

And so too is it Christmas for us – not when we receive the riches and favors of this world, but when we receive the life of God, the *adoption as [His] sons*, spoken of by St. Paul – and this when we are slain by the Holy Cross in the waters of Holy Baptism and then raised to a new life. A new life as a child of God, a Holy Innocent, in the forgiveness of our sins. A new life when each day is Christmas day, as Christ is born in us and we in Him. A new life that however, whenever, and wherever our life here ends, we be cradled in the arms of our Father in heaven.

And so the truth is that today we heard not so much of the sin that intrudes on the Christmas story, **but the Christmas story that intruded on sin** – the sin in the world, and the sin in our hearts. That we be held no longer captive, but that out of the Egypt of our sins, our Father would call each of us. To find our **life** not under the tree on which hangs lights and ornaments, but under the tree on which hangs to Son of God. To find our **joy** not in open presents, but in the open grave. And to find our **peace** not in family feasts, but in the feast of forgiveness, in the body and blood of Jesus, here given us to eat and to drink.

And so the Holy Innocents today do not spoil the spirit of Christmas, but teach us something about Christmas. Though they do not sing like the angels, or bring gifts like the magi, or worship like the shepherds – nevertheless, *it is perhaps in them* that we can most see ourselves in this story. And learn from them to fix our eyes on the Holy Innocent One – who will lay down His life and shed His blood that we might live. That we see the heel now wrapped in swaddling clothes will soon come down upon the serpent's head, to set us free. That we look always with childlike eyes of faith and cry, *Abba, Father!* That as we prayed: *“we may ever be alive in Him who made Himself to be like us.”* And so it be a *truly* Merry Christmas – not just for now, but forever.

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.