

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
12/29/2013, Christmas 1A
Isaiah 63:7-9, Matthew 2:13-23
The Cause of Christmas

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I call this morning's sermon "The Cause of Christmas." It is a sermon that starts off bad, because it talks about King Herod, but it ends up good, I hope, because it talks about the compassion of our God.

My opening text is from our First Lesson, from Isaiah 63:8-9. It is a happy text, beautifully in the spirit of Christmas because it teaches us that when the Lord became our Savior, he did not do so from a safe, far distance away, as if with some long stick stretching from heaven to earth he could stir things up here on earth and set them right without having to mingle himself with us. No, our Maker did not save us by way of some instrument, but rather by way of himself. It was his very presence that saved us:

...and [the LORD] became their savior ⁹in all their distress.
It was no messenger or angel but *his presence* that saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old. (Isaiah 63:8-9, NRSV)

The good news of Christmas is that the Lord, with his love and pity, is in charge of this world, and not King Herod.

So, we begin with this sad subject, King Herod. On Christmas Eve our hearts were moved as we sang the lovely hymn "Silent Night, Holy Night." But the truth is that not all was well that first Christmas night. In the fields round about Bethlehem, with the "multitude of heavenly host," and at the manger of the holy Babe, it was true, yes, that "all was calm, all was bright." But meanwhile, King Herod sat on his throne, and the heart of that miserable man was never calm and never bright, but was continually occupied with lust for power and plots against enemies, real or supposed. Herod's heart was restless, unrestrained, with hardly a drop of human sympathy, so that it was said of him that it was better to be Herod's dog than his son, for he executed two of his sons as well as one of his wives. Herod's "Massacre of the Innocents" at Bethlehem was bloody business as usual for that man. Better the plain porridge of a poor man in his hut, surrounded by a loving family and a clean conscience, than the purple robes and golden crown of that wicked man King Herod.

Judgment Day does not look good for Herod. He will be in the hands of the very Christ he tried to murder. The final say will be up to Jesus. Still, I do not think I would like to be King Herod come the Final Judgment.

ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE ON HEROD

I bet you can see that I do not much like King Herod. But let me step back a moment to acknowledge that his story is probably more complex and human than I have suggested so far. For one thing, King Herod was not ignorant of God. He considered himself to be a Jew and he practiced the Jewish faith. Indeed, he was responsible for the magnificent Temple that years later the disciples of Jesus would admire, pointing out its great stones. Herod did this by way of a massive expansion of the Second Temple built after the Babylonian captivity of the Jews. It was such a significant expansion that the temple became known as “Herod’s Temple.” So, Herod was not ignorant of God.

Furthermore, the Massacre of the Innocents, about which we grieve today, was probably but a passing moment for the man in a long, long reign — a reign filled with tough decisions and decisive action. King Herod might well have justified each one of his deeds by the conviction that they were for the overall welfare of his land.

Such justifications are always possible and might even be true. Life is complex. It is full of moral dilemmas and puzzles and shades of gray, so that sometimes even good-hearted people end up making decisions that other good-hearted people could disagree with.

Herod knew the commandments of God. You and I know them too, including the commandment “Thou shall not kill.” But he did a lot of killing. Furthermore, in today’s story, he clearly killed the innocent, for the deaths he ordered were just little boys. They had done no wrong. They just happened to be in the way of the King.

Still, if Herod’s pastor had discussed the matter with him in the pastor’s study, Herod might have been driven to cry out, “I *must* do this! I know they are innocent children. But I must kill them. The peace and harmony of the entire state is at risk. Forgive me, but I must do this terrible deed.”

If Herod had such a conversation with his pastor, we cannot know its details, since it is protected by confidentiality. But I would hope that Herod’s pastor would approach that conversation as I hope I would too: that is, that the pastor would begin with the divine dimension. “Thou shall not kill.” Justice requires the protection of the innocent. Such important conversations have to start somewhere. Let them start with the commandments of God.

One thing I can say about Herod’s decision to order the Massacre of the Innocents: Whether he agonized about it or not, one thing is pretty clear: he himself did not much suffer in the process. He ordered suffering for others, but

he himself did not much suffer along the way. His royal decision had this characteristic: It is death for others, but convenient for himself.

Alas, the spiritual descendents of King Herod have been so numerous over the centuries that it would be a sad and long tale to tell the story of human cruelty on this earth.

THE LOVINGKINDNESS OF OUR GOD

All of this meanness contrasts so terribly with the lovingkindness of the Lord of which Isaiah sings in today's text. Let me read that text again, this time in the King James Version:

⁷I will mention the lovingkindnesses of the LORD, and the praises of the LORD, according to all that the LORD hath bestowed on us, and the great goodness toward the house of Israel, which he hath bestowed on them according to his mercies, and according to the multitude of his lovingkindnesses. ⁸For he said, Surely they are my people, children that will not lie: so he was their Saviour. ⁹In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them: in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; and he bare them, and carried them all the days of old.
(Isaiah 63:7-9, KJV)

DOING GOOD, WHILE NOT BEING SO GOOD

It is possible in this busy world to *do* good, while not *being* so very good in the process. It is possible, for example, to give a coin to a beggar, but also to glance at the beggar with contempt. It is possible to bandage up a man who has been set upon by robbers and left for dead, but to mumble and complain while hoisting him up on the donkey. It is possible to take care of the elderly, but to be impatient and resentful along the way. Good is good, even if our heart is not so good along the way. And yet, it is even more splendid when good deeds spring from a good heart. Isaiah sings about the Lord because the Lord has a good heart. His deeds spring from "lovingkindness," which is a sweet word indeed.

Notice that the King James Version of our text includes one of the most thrilling lines in the Bible:

⁹In all their affliction he was afflicted... (Isaiah 63:9, KJV)

This divine compassion is the blessed cause of Christmas. It seems to be the case that our Maker could not look on from afar at all the sufferings and heartaches on earth and remain *unmoved*. He could not look upon human pain and simply *note* it. Rather, he *felt* it. A robot or some fine scientific instrument might be able to observe and note suffering, but it could not feel the suffering. And a psychopath might note suffering, but remain perfectly calm before it or even enjoy it. But our God is not a robot and certainly he is not a psychopath. Rather, he is a God of compassion. That word is the perfect one for our God: “passions” are “communicated” to him. He shares them:

⁹In all *their* affliction *he* was afflicted... (Isaiah 63:9, KJV)

And so, on the road to Damascus, what Jesus said to the persecutor Saul was no poetry or exaggeration or curveball from out of the blue, but was rather a revelation of the very heart of our God:

⁴And he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou *me*? (Acts 9:4, KJV)

King Herod orders his Massacre of the Innocents and then moves on. Business as usual. But the suffering of those little boys of Bethlehem burns on eternally in the heart of their Maker. One day, both Herod and those children are going to deal with God, for the salvation of the little ones and possibly for the damnation of the other.

Oh, King Herod. You had no idea the game you were playing! You did not know, or maybe you forgot, that there is a God above, and that in all the affliction of the children of Bethlehem he himself was afflicted. One day you must stand before the God who is well able to judge you, well able to distinguish what was genuine kingship for the sake of the people versus was really just age-old greed for yourself.

COMPASSION FOR US TOO

The story of King Herod is a story told on a grand scale, involving royalty and murder of children. But on our everyday more humble scale, the goodness of our God remains the same: in all our affliction, *he* is afflicted. In our aches and pains, our God feels aches and pains. In our loneliness, in our occasional dread that life is simply not going to work out well for us, that we are never going to get a good job or never going to fall in love or get married or that we are never going to have good health... in all these sorrows and self-doubts God himself is afflicted.

And so we have Christmas. We have God himself coming to earth to set things right. He sends no angel to do the job, he writes no computer code that could somehow cause the world to function better. Rather, he is born of the Virgin Mary in a stable in Bethlehem, ready to launch himself into his great battle to save the world. His compassion is the great cause of Christmas. And to him be the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.