

Matthew 2:13-23

It shouldn't surprise us that churches are full for Christmas, yet not before, and certainly not after. On Christmas the happy story of Luke 2 is heard. Before Christmas, however, we hear John the Baptist crying out, with locust breath, for us to repent. And after Christmas the sad, even heart-wrenching story of Herod slaughtering all the baby boys in Bethlehem.

The same is true of Easter. The happy story of the resurrection fills the pews. Yet this is hardly the case during the six long weeks of Lent before Easter.

If the church can be seen as a restaurant, it stands to reason that people will select the items they want from the menu. "I'll take one Christmas and one Easter." "Which sides do you want with these? Advent, Herod, Lent?" "Oh, no sides for me, just Christmas and Easter."

Perhaps this is indicative of life in this world. Things are tough all over. Everyone deals with troubles, whether it be at work, at school, or even at home. If we turn on the news, we hear stories that make us cringe. We have enough problems and grief just living day to day. We don't want to hear more of the same when we go to church. We want to hear happy stuff. We want to escape from life. We want to be uplifted.

Yet here you are today on the First Sunday after Christmas, and St. Matthew is doing his best to burden you with sorrow rather than lift you up with joy. "*Then Herod,*" he writes, "*when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under.*"

Now granted, this is historical fact. But why does Matthew have to write it down for us? Yet I suppose you could say kind of the same thing to me. "Well, pastor, why don't you preach on the Epistle text instead of Matthew's Gospel?" I could do that, but I would be doing you a disservice because St. Matthew tells it like it is.

We've been told all our lives that Christmas is a happy time of the year. And certainly it is, maybe even the happiest. But troubles do not suddenly vanish when Christmas comes. It's like a crying baby who is hungry, tired, and has a dirty diaper. You might be able to distract him for a few moments and stop him from crying, but he'll go right back to it and will not stop until his needs are met. In much the same way, Christmas is a soothing distraction. But eventually we have to face up to life again. And life can be pretty cruel.

I do believe it's true that some people avoid the church because they don't think they measure up. Life has not been good to them, and they have the battle scars to prove it. In their minds, they are not "church-worthy" because their life is such a mess, and they may have much in their past of which they are ashamed.

But for whom, really, is the church? We should ask, for whom was Jesus born? Did He come only for those people who live in well-adjusted families? Did He come for those whose past lives are spotless? Those who never had a suicidal thought? Who have never been in trouble with the law? Never struggled with drugs or pornography?

This is where St. Matthew sets us straight. Look at the world, he says, into which Jesus was born. It was sinful, violent, sorrowful, full of murder and mayhem, and this raging ruler King Herod. It was not a well-adjusted world. It was a mess. People's lives were a mess. It was no different from life today.

And so in telling us all about Herod, the slaughter, the mournful tears, Matthew is telling us not only what Christmas is all about, but what Jesus is all about. He was born for those who had more grief than joy on Christmas. Jesus was born for the little child whose father comes home drunk night after night. For the woman who is living with depression. The man who lost his job and cannot afford to feed his family, let alone buy Christmas presents for them. Jesus was born for the family who is dealing with divorce. For those parents who just lost their child.

Here's how it is...it you do not have any troubles in life, then St. Matthew's Christmas story is not for you. You simply will not relate. But if you know what it's like to be lonely, to cry painful tears, maybe go through a divorce, or even more than one, then Matthew's Christmas story is for you. If you have shame in your past, if you've felt guilt because you gave in to temptation and did not walk away from it, then Matthew tells you, in his Christmas story, that Jesus was born for you.

His Christmas story may not be very uplifting because of all the tears, but it does point us to Calvary where Jesus was uplifted on a cross for you. Those innocent baby boys who were killed in Bethlehem truly point us to the innocent One who was slaughtered for all sinners, not by Herod, but by Pilate.

At Christmas God stepped out of His perfect world and entered into our world. And so your God knows all about suffering and being violated, about hatred, ugliness, and death. Jesus has come for people like you and me who deal with one thing after another. And He came to face your burdens and put them on His own shoulders. Jesus was born to die on a cross for you.

So no matter who you are, no matter how awful your past, you are forgiven. The innocent One took the place of all us guilty ones. There is nothing so horrible which you have done that it cannot be forgiven. It's already been forgiven. Jesus carried it to the cross. All your sins are forgiven.

And friend, with the burden of your sin and guilt removed from you, life is a little bit easier. Take comfort from Matthew's Christmas story. He makes it painfully clear that no matter what you're going through, you have a Savior in Jesus. He was born for you. Amen.