

**Herod and the Holy Innocents**  
**HEROD AND THE HOLY INNOCENTS: WHEN POLITICS SERVES EVIL**

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The sermon begins with Linda Eder's, Christmas Stays the Same:

Santa Claus and mistletoe, carols by the fire,  
Send a card and send a little Christmas cheer;  
Silent night, a fall of snow, listen to the choir:  
Everyone is happy that it's here.

For we all remember some past December  
Of tinsel and holly and people we love....

Oh the years may change, but Christmas stays the same.

That's just one of the many songs of Christmas that fill the air, and our hearts, with the heart-warming hopes that make Christmas Christmas. For some, it's Mel Torme's "Chestnuts roasting on an open fire, Jack Frost nipping at your nose." For me, back in the 60's, and then annually into the 80's, it was Andy Williams inviting us all into the billion dollar industry building the illusions that Christmas was the perfect time of year. Sure, with Linda Eder we all "remember some past December of tinsel and holly and people we love." But what happens when these dreamlike illusions meet the intrusions of real life? What happens when perfect families on television encounter the unscripted friction of real life patterns of poor choices, dysfunctional behavior, and broken relationships? Our texts for the commemoration of the Holy Innocents represent the intrusion of tragic disappointment, and inject an outrageous display of the political destruction into the "dreamless sleep" of "holy nights" that connect the baby born in Bethlehem on Christmas to the wondrous gifts of the magi given with Epiphany.

So, what do you do with intrusions of real life into the fantasy worlds our hopes often create? As a pastor I am always struck by how many funerals occur around Christmas, and this year is no exception, with the unexpected death of one of our newer associate members, Carol Sims, on Christmas Eve. Psychologists have often noted the marked increase in depression-related disorders around this time of year. On the political front, the raising of the terrorist threat to code orange and the daily news accounts of deaths in Iraq help to remind us that reality, more often than we like, takes turns that fall short of our hopes, sometimes with disappointments of tragic proportions. Again this morning's Gospel fits that bill. It's about something more than personal disappointment and seasonal depression. Our Gospel Lesson raises the issue of raw evil, when political expediency (like that of Herod's) knows no boundaries, and when orders from the top expose the essence of disorder, otherwise known simply as tyranny.

Our Daily Devotional Guide for Advent challenged Fred and Carolyn Elsass to think about this difficult text, Matthew 2:13-18, when Joseph and Jesus and Mary were forced to flee to Egypt to avoid the tragic consequence that resulted from Herod's evil orders to slaughter innocent newborns within his realm and (technically) under his care and protection. Fred invited us to think about the problems of refugees forced to live in the squalor of makeshift camps around the world. I'd like to focus on the tyrannical misrule that so willingly causes these problems. This is, without doubt, a difficult issue to raise because it requires the

background of some history, and a little bit of political theory, too; but let me take my best shot.

Historically speaking, neither Christians nor Jews had any stake in questions related to the politics of imperial power during biblical times, primarily because they were always on the wrong side of that debate, the underside. It wasn't until the third century of the Christian Era, with the conversion of Constantine, that Christians could begin to think about "geo-politics" as something that might actually cooperate with God's will, rather than as a force that always resisted God's will and God's rule. Sure, there were passages like Chapter 13 in the Book of Romans that tried to hold the kingdoms of this world accountable to the promises of their own rhetoric, namely, to uphold what is good and to resist what is evil; but for the most part Christians early on thought of Chapter 13 in the Book of Revelations, where global powers were servants of the ten-headed beast, which terrorized God's people and would surely be destroyed with the return of the Lamb of God as the victorious Lord of all.

St. Augustine, who wrote in the fourth and fifth centuries, helped Christians to think critically about the relationship of Church and State; but his work has only made life more complicated for Christians because unlike Eusebius before him, who baptized everything Roman with the conversion of Constantine as a "Christian" ruler, and unlike Christians before that, who condemned everything Roman as the work of the ten-headed beast, Augustine required that we learn to discern between the use of political power for good and the misuse of political power for evil. This is trickier than you might think, and Christians have often found themselves on the wrong side of the challenge to discern faithfully between governments acting rightly and wrongly.

Let me illustrate with a story. Back at the turn of the century, in a little village outside the home of Immanuel Kant, in Koningsberg, Germany, there lived a prominent attorney with significant wealth and influence, at a time when Germany was entering into a period of serious economic despair, which gave rise to another of its many waves of anti-semitic purges. It was a time when the kaiser placed great value on German blood and Nordic ancestry. In order to make sure that more of Germany's resources were made available to help Germans in need, this prominent Jewish family was banished from the little village of Schirwindt, the town from which my immigrant fore-fathers took their name upon their arrival in America. The Sherwindts walked through Ellis Island with their lives, but their land was subsequently lost through the expropriation of a very legal judgment based on the non-payment of taxes. It seemed just back then, although some German Lutherans finally figured out during the Second World War - although mostly after the war - that perhaps they had failed to discern well in trying to figure out when it was that political leaders were misleaders, and governments were abusing their power to do evil rather than using their power to serve good. Martin Niemoller, a pastor of many German Lutherans who made poor choices during this failure of faithfulness, is now famous for his words:

First, they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out because I was not a socialist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me, and there was no one left to speak for me.

What happened with the slaughter of the Holy Innocents under Herod's misrule was tragic and horrifying. Neither Christians nor Jews bore much responsibility for Herod's tyranny because he ruled with unchecked power. Reinhold Niebuhr made Christian Realism famous with his twentieth century observation, "Power corrupts (always), and absolute power corrupts absolutely." [That's the little bit of political theory I promised earlier.] Divided government with checks and balances offers relief from unchecked abuses of power; but still the need for voices to discern faithfully and speak out with courage against abuses of power remains. Christians cannot grow complacent, or so aligned with ruling interests that we lose our critical distance, which enables us to see power's victims, and empowers us to stand with them.

**These are not just matters that affect world affairs somewhere across the ocean. They are challenges we face us as citizens in America, even right here as members of Zion. In the year and a half that I have served as Zion's Pastor, I have come to see that some of Zion's difficulties over the years have been related, in part at least, to this common political problem, namely, the inability of some to discern between God's will and their own interests, coupled with the unwillingness among the many to use their gifts of discernment to stand against the narrow interests that serve some and to stand with the broader interests of God's will for the congregation as a whole. Peter Steinke, a noted parish health specialist, calls this the challenge of becoming a healthy community.**

**Hymn #415 in the Lutheran Book of Worship was written for the church with precisely these kinds of political challenges in mind.**

**God of grace and God of glory, on your people pour your power;  
Crown your ancient church's story; bring its bud to glorious flower.  
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage for the facing of this hour,  
for the facing of this hour.**

**Lo! The hosts of evil round us scorn the Christ, assail his ways!  
From the fears that long have bound us free our hearts to faith and praise. Grant us  
wisdom, grant us courage for the living of these days,  
for the living of these days.**

**Save us from weak resignation to the evils we deplore;  
Let the gift of your salvation be our glory evermore.  
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage serving you whom we adore,  
serving you whom we adore.**

**We've come a long way from Linda Eder's enduring images in Christmas Stays the Same. But what can you do when the slaughter of the Holy Innocents intrudes itself into the Christmas season? "Grant us wisdom [to discern faithfully], grant us courage [to act boldly], serving you whom we adore, serving you whom we adore." I thought a lot about making Hymn #415 the Hymn of the Day. However, upon further consideration, I concluded that the challenge of discerning well and acting faithfully as Christians flows from the faith that connects us to the message and the man about whom we sing when the beautiful tune of Greensleeves invites us to figure out that this child, "the babe, the Son of Mary" is our Lord, whom we pledge to serve ... in word and deed ... as we learn the art of speaking out and living boldly ... in Jesus' name.**

**Amen**