

Matthew 2:13-23
First Sunday of Christmas
The Holy Innocents
December 28, 2025

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

Then Herod, 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, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

A few months ago, all our society was wrestling over the horrific murder of a rather calm political figure who just wanted to go to college campuses and talk with the young generation about what was the best social policy for their future... discussion that often included mention of Jesus. While the political landscape argued over whether he was a political villain worthy of death or a political martyr for free speech, Christians debated whether or not he should be considered a true martyr of the faith.

Without attempting to settle that debate, I might note that very few Christians asked the same of the schoolchildren murdered the week or two before while they prayed in chapel. Is it because they weren't as notable? Weren't as publicly known? Were they somehow not 'as Christian' because instead of confessing before men they were praying to God?

From of old, the infant boys slaughtered in Bethlehem have been remembered as the first martyrs and have been called ‘the Holy Innocents.’ By what criteria? – were they children of devout families of Abraham’s faith in the coming Christ? Do we know that for a fact? Or maybe they were ignorant of the Christ’s coming and so ‘got a pass’ and were declared ‘innocent’? No, that’s not it. Had they lived up to the first two years of life in *actual* holy innocence? – No, that’s not it either.

Perhaps the remembrance of the Holy Innocents may help us speak of martyrdom as less about the quality of a particular person, and more about simply people of any age getting in the way of Satan’s hatred of Christ. Case in point: the martyrs in Nigeria and throughout Africa about whom the western media is so disinterested in reporting... are they martyred for a particular righteousness or because they have social media outlets or because they draw large crowds? Or are they martyred simply because they live out daily life worshipping the Christ of the manger and cross, to the great anger and hatred of those bending the knee to the Allah of the sword?

And, since martyrdom is not a status of meritorious righteousness in God’s eyes, is there much reason to differentiate between Satan’s attack on *the martyrs* and his attack on those ‘merely’ “persecuted for righteousness’ sake.” (That “righteousness” *being* Christ himself... persecuted for *his* sake.) Yes, some may *die* because Christ is the devil’s target; others may *suffer* because Christ

is the devil's target; others may live a life humble life of cross-bearing compared to society because Christ is the devil's target. But, here's the point: suffering and death and the quiet life of cross-bearing happen in flesh and blood; and the remembrance of the holy innocents is a reminder that spiritual warfare happens on earth to flesh and blood. Didn't we just hear Jesus a few weeks ago say to the crowds concerning John: "From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence..." Yes, spiritual warfare happens in flesh-and-blood reality, even in situations 'governed' (if you will) by politicians of the day, like Herod or Pilate, or Biden or Trump.

If, before this Advent and Christmas, we formerly had trouble seeing in daily life the relevance of spiritual-sounding terms like "sin," this season's meditation on the Incarnation (and especially Christmas Eve's meditation) ought have given a new alertness to sin's hold on and daily-life role in a creation that is just as "incarnate" as it is "fallen"... indeed, lives out its *spiritually*-fallen state in an *incarnational* daily life.

But, if for some reason, in your mind's eye you still find yourself trying to spiritualize not only sin, but also the Savior who came into the world through conception in the womb, birth in a crowded town, a night in a manger... if we still struggle with *spiritualizing* "the light shining the darkness," then this morning we

are confronted with the graphic incarnational reality of spiritual warfare between Satan and Christ.

Or, to say it slightly differently, just as we've spent so much time this season considering that our salvation in Christ is a flesh-and-blood truth and thus, relevant to our incarnational daily and eternal life; equally so, Satan's hatred and all Christ's enemies' hatred of that salvation is a hatred lived out in flesh-and-blood truth.

You may not be a martyr for the faith (of course, such a title is most often earned suddenly and unexpectedly), but *even today* does Satan not attack you and your daily life in very flesh-and-blood ways? Does your own Old Adam join forces with the devil and the fallen world as an unholy trinity in merely *spiritual*, theoretical ways? Or, as Luther very gently and pastorally points out, ought you consider your station in life and see in *daily* life the sinfulness of all that has flowed from your mind, tongue, and hands... that has harmed your neighbor and offended God by being done or left undone?

And, does it really help to say, "Nothing personal against the *individual*; it's simply Satan and Old Adam and their mutual hatred of *Christ*"? But if of *Christ*, then also of those who cling to Christ. True, Jesus says, "If the world hates you, it hated me first"... but we ought also hear that said this way: "Because the world hated me first, it will hate you." And just as it hated Christ in his earthly life, so it hurls its worst at your earthly life. Thus, Old Adam attacks your confidence in

your marriage, the world questions your love of your family, Satan upends your joy in your congregation, plunges thorns into your flesh, hurls enemies into your neighborhoods, entices the supposed wise of our society to dabble in false doctrine that impacts daily life and undercuts eternal life.

In short, the observance of the Holy Innocents ought *annually* (whether on a Sunday or not, it's always December 28th) remind us that Satan's hatred of Christ is no less today than it was 2000 years ago... and, thus, the individual crosses borne and even martyrdom suffered by those who cling to Christ is no less likely today than it was 2000 years ago.

And yet, the Gospel in all of this is that 2000 years ago, Satan's hatred of Christ was *manifest* in the real world **because** Christ had come into the real world, into flesh and blood. He had manifest in a world long held captive by the devil that the ancient promise was no empty proclamation, that the prophets had no vain preaching, but that it was all a divine truth that – though designed by Him above – would play out among and benefit those below.

The *bondage* had been very manifestly true, for each sinner who only believed the Fall to be a spiritual reality was in bondage to all the daily symptoms and consequences of the Fall happening very bodily. And now the *rescue* from that bondage, the *salvation* from that bondage, would be equally manifestly true, for the Christ would *suffer* and *bleed* and *die*, and his victory would be manifestly true in

his own resurrected *body*, and all who hoped in spiritual freedom in Him would eventually also be free from all the daily-life symptoms and consequences of the Fall, even unto their own resurrected, imperishable, immortal body. And each sinner who believed the Christ to be more than a spiritual reality would – even in the world of enemies – would truly be born anew in quite tangible waters, to be separated from the world of unbelievers in the holy ark that is the Christian Church... and those newborn children of God would be sustained in quite tangible food and drink – though designed by Him above – to be distributed among and benefit those below.

And if that was true 2000 years ago, if that divinely-designed defense against the attacks of Satan was unveiled and manifestly instituted 2000 years ago, if all of that was the spiritual warfare between Satan and Christ, and Christ established himself as the Church's real-life shield *then*, is not the real-world attack of Satan against the Church still today a daily-life reminder that Christ is still manifest in and with His Church?

Is His presence with His Church any less manifestly true today than it was 2000 years ago? He still proclaims His Word – “He who hears you hears Me,” He says to His preachers. He still gives new birth through tangible waters, a new birth not only for the soul, but the adoption into an inheritance of the resurrection for the body. He still gathers His faithful each Lord's Day (a very concrete day each week on the real-world calendar!) to give us rest... rest in forgiveness

that assures us a clear conscience before and unity with God... that we may be convinced that nothing in all *creation* – not in heaven or on earth or under the earth, nothing visible in creation, nothing invisible in creation – nothing in this old, broken creation – not even the dark prince of this world – can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

And in that love of God and unity with Him, He gathers us at His banqueting Table, and our rest is complete, our weary sojourn strengthened, by His own real-world body and blood, that He may sustain us unto life everlasting, no matter what crosses we must bear, what persecution we must suffer, what martyrdom we must taste. No matter what temporally horrific attacks bombard those who by the blood of Jesus are justified and may be called ‘the Holy Innocents’... not matter what befalls *you* because you are the Church, your shared *glory* with the Christ Satan attacks is just as certain as your shared *sufferings* with Him.

And you may say, “But, pastor, such horrific things happen in real life *outside* the church as well, even non-Christian against non-Christian.” Yes, in its wild hatred of Christ, evil even attacks itself and the godless will always fight against each other with all the hallmarks of godlessness, and even with all the courage of Godliness.

But they do so without the comfort of Christ Jesus, for only in the Church do we have the comfort that Christ is ours and we are His. More than that, we dwell with Christ, and He with us. Indeed,

more than that, in His Word and Sacrament, we dwell *in* Christ, and He *in* us. And that mysterious union, a result of His promise to be with us always, manifests itself in the Divine Service that it may sustain us in daily life. God comes to His people here and now, that He may give rest to the weary and strength for the sojourn, that we may go another seven days in the manifest reality of the old, fallen creation before another Lord's Day – the eighth day – which momentarily manifests for us the equal reality of the new creation... that new creation that is yours already now by inheritance, where you will eternally live with Christ, if now you are not ashamed to suffer, even die, with Him.

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

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