Sermon copyright © 2010 by Pastor Erik Kindem, Peace Lutheran Church, Seattle, WA. All rights reserved.

Sunday after Christmas 1A
Peace, Seattle
December 26, 2010 epk
Matthew 2:13-23

Lord, you deemed it good to be born among a people in an occupied land, amid war and strife, where kings raged and soldiers ravaged with the sword. As we marvel at the mystery of your incarnation among us, the message of the angels, the song of Mary, give us grace to see all the ways you stand beside us, sharing our pain and sorrow, celebrating our joy.[1]

The Loss of Innocence

She got the phone call about cousins back in Ohio on the afternoon of Christmas Day.
Most of their children's new Christmas toys hadn't even been played with,

- bits of paper from wrapped packages still littered the floor,
- leftover pie and cookies were still on the kitchen table,
- and the memories of this year's Christmas Eve festivities were becoming the food for dreams, when the fire started.

It came in the evening—no one knows how—and consumed their house and everything in it.

Thank God, the most important things were spared—the children and parents—made it out alive.

Our gospel text from Matthew greets us much the same way—like a bad dream, too awful to be true.

Having just celebrated the joyful birth of Christ with all the carols and feasting and family traditions that go with it, we are suddenly plunged into the depth of despair on this first day after Christmas.

It's as though the joy that we celebrated only yesterday has suddenly been stripped away by the reality of the perils of this world.

We tend to sentimentalize Christmas. But this morning Matthew bends over backward to convince us that Christmas is about a God who enters into the true reality of human life, even in its most bleak aspects.

King Herod, paranoid, power-hungry Herod, hears of the birth of another King and he takes drastic measures to insure that there will be no threat to his reign from any quarter: he launches a campaign against the babies in Bethlehem.

While angels, prophets, and Magi point to the Divine in the child of Bethlehem, threats of violence and the suffering of innocents are not far behind.

From the very beginning, the life of Jesus is characterized by a mixture of joy and sorrow, the revelation both of God's compassionate love and the terrible price that attends that kind of love.

To the poor and outcaste, to those who live in the margins of society, to the invisible ones, Emmanuel represents HOPE.

[1] From a prayer by William Willimon, *Pulpit Resource,* Vol.26:4, 1998, p.55, edited by epk.

Sermon copyright © 2010 by Pastor Erik Kindem, Peace Lutheran Church, Seattle, WA. All rights reserved.

But to a power-hungry world full of greed and preoccupied with self-preservation Emmanuel represents THREAT. He must be destroyed.

Joseph, a man who listens to his dreams and has the courage to act on them, packs up his family and flees to Egypt, and baby Jesus is, for the moment, safe.

But we, and all those who hear the unfolding story of his life, have learned something crucial to understanding the meaning of God with us:

- The birth of God's Chosen One breeds opposition as well as hope.
- The evil forces of this world, the corrupt leaders and dictators and violent men, are not going to lay down their arms, fold their hands, and walk away.

Herod orders the murder of innocent children. What does this mean?
That what is evil in the world will resist God's promised one, and his message of justice and peace with every fiber of its being.

In Luke's telling of the story no danger looms. Shepherds—not soldiers—make haste to Bethlehem. In Luke, the glow of Christmas joy continues well into Jesus childhood.

But in Matthew's gospel, Herod is a cold, realistic reminder of the kind of world it is for many of God's people.

Matthew's nativity reminds us that God in Jesus has come to the same world where we live, and work, and struggle. Jesus does not remain above the human fray. Instead, Jesus enters into the fray in order to bring us to God.

Kerry Bond, a pastor studying in Israel, makes the point in remembering his trip to Bethlehem:
With his mini-sabbatical about to end, Bond spent his last full day at the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem.

> "I toured the church making videos of its exquisite mosaic floors, smelling the incense and experiencing the excitement of the Nativity as I had never before," he writes, "Yet the most revealing moment did not happen within the church, but just outside. As I emerged a look of panic was in the eyes of the souvenir vendors. A white puff of smoke arose over some nearby buildings. Several dozen people ran from the smoke towards the church. Soon my eyes and the eyes of those around me began to water uncontrollably. My throat tightened. Tear gas!
>
> "I never expected something like this to happen. But why shouldn't I? This is the city where Herod sent his hit-men to ... kill the infant Jesus. This is the town where the mothers of murdered children cried the lamentation of Rachel. Bethlehem is not only the place of the divine mystery of the incarnation, but also the place of human brutality."[2]

The author of Hebrews writes:

> Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death.

What kind of God-with-us does the world need? The kind who embraces the full range of the human condition without turning away, without flinching, without backing down.

[2] Kerry Bond, *The Living Pulpit,* October-December 1995, p. 15.

Sermon copyright © 2010 by Pastor Erik Kindem, Peace Lutheran Church, Seattle, WA. All rights reserved.

The kind of Savior we need is one who counts every life as precious and is willing to give up everything in order that we might be brought into a new relationship with God and with one another.

And this is the God-with-us we have in Jesus Christ.

> "The mystery of God's love," writes Henry Nouwen, "is not that he takes our pains away, but that he first wants to share them with us. The truly good news is that God is not a distant God, a God to be feared and avoided, a God of revenge, but a God who is moved by our pain and participates in the fullness of the human struggle."[3]

So, how are we to respond to Matthew's story this morning?

Maybe we can take our cue from our Brother Martin, who answered in this way:

> "There are many of you in this congregation who think to yourselves: If only I had been there! How quick I would have been to help the Baby! I would have washed his linen..." You say that because you know how great Christ is, but if you had been there at that time you would have done no better than the people of Bethlehem. Childish and silly thoughts are these! Why don't you do it now! You have Christ in your neighbor. You ought to serve him, for what you do to your neighbor in need you do to the Lord Christ himself."[4]

The best way we can respond to the message in Matthew's gospel is to resolve, by the grace God has sown in us, to become communities in which violence is not an option; congregations that provide a safe place for children, which invite and welcome refugees and strangers, which protect innocent ones.

For by doing so, we protect and welcome the Lord himself. Amen.

[3] H. Nouwen, *Letters to Marc About Jesus*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1988).
[4] Quoted in R. Bainton, *The Martin Luther Christmas Book*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1958), p.38.