

1st Sun. of Christmas – Matthew 2:13-23

I get criticized if I mention the crucifixion at Christmas. Even though it seems like an easy play on words. Crucifix-mas? Christma-fixion? Anyway...

You may not be as much troubled at it now, feeling Christmas is somewhat past, though we're only on day 5, less than half done with Christmas. It may not have struck you intensely this morning, but Pastor Sonja and I still felt this was a jarring reading that needed a few words, even if it took a couple minutes away later from the pleasant carol singing of your favorites.

But that's actually exactly where I want to start. See, when Christmas feels like it's supposed to be a favorite-filled pleasant diversion of holiday cheer to distract you from whatever variety of other feelings or current events, that's a watered-down mediocre Christmas. Christmas and incarnation need to be God's answers to all of our life. Not just a different story, but something that changes the story we know too well. If it's going to be powerful, it needs to confront the powers that rule over us.

Just as Luke's Christmas story situates the birth in and against the Roman Empire—giving Jesus titles like Savior and Lord instead of Caesar—Matthew also deals with the realities of an oppressive and hostile government. This story is brutal. Herod kills all the babies, infants, toddlers, children under two years old, furiously trying to maintain his position. And because he's mean.

It's important to realize Matthew is echoing another story, of Old Testament patterns. While Jesus is fitting into our human story, he's also fitting into God's story, since God's story always needs to meet and speak to our human story.

Particularly the slaughter of the innocents, as this Bethlehem killing is called, happened in the book of Exodus, when Pharaoh in Egypt started killing babies, and Moses escaped by being hidden in a basket in the river. Standing for the whole "let my people go," with Jesus the escape was reversed, fleeing *to* Egypt, eisodus instead of

exodus. Matthew is hinting that Jesus, in part, will be a teacher like Moses, beginning with the Sermon on the Mount. And we expect him to lead his people to freedom.

You might like to know the slaughter of the innocents is frequently figured to be Matthew's story-telling device and not a historical event. Nobody else writes about it, though it seems like it would've been kinda worth reporting.

But even if the fiction makes you feel a little better, it's not to brush it aside. One instance might not have happened, but there are still people and even little children killed because of religious persecutions and vindictive rulers and because some people are mean, who would rather destroy than help life.

Again, Jesus having to flee to Egypt is an important identifier for Palestinians and many others, that he also was a refugee, since too many have to face that reality.

For God meeting human reality, in our own much smaller ways, we don't ignore the bad things. We need God to deal with them. Even, eventually in Jesus' life, dealing with our death.

We need to be saved from such. Christmas can be sweet and tender, but it has to matter, to make a difference.

It's within this context and not apart from it that we receive this good news, the tidings of comfort and joy, the one who brings peace to earth, the only way we say all is calm, all is bright. So, still: Merry Christmas