

Minor Festivals: The Holy Innocents, December 28

Christmas Joy in a Wicked World

When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. (Matthew 2:16)

The Magi (traditionally called “Wise Men”) from the East asked a question that, for their souls’ salvation, all people need to have answered: “Where is the One who has been born king of the Jews?” The Magi traveled to the Land of Judea, summoned by a specially created star that announced the birth of the Savior. To find the newborn King, they went to the nation’s capital of Jerusalem. They started asking around, and news of their search reached King Herod the Great’s ears. This news troubled him. “I’m king of the Jews, and there isn’t room for another one,” he thought.

He was disturbed. And because he was disturbed, so were his people—and with good reason. Herod jealously guarded his throne. He exterminated anyone he perceived as a threat—his uncle, his mother-in-law, his brother-in-law, his wife, three of his sons, and countless others. He called in the Jewish religious leaders and inquired about the birthplace of their promised Messiah. They could tell him right away that Micah the prophet foretold that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. Calling in the Magi, he sent them to Bethlehem to search for the child. “As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him,” he instructed. Of course, it was a ruse. He didn’t want to worship him, but terminate him.

The Magi left the king and headed for David’s town of Bethlehem. The star reappeared and stopped directly over the house where Jesus, his mother, and his step-father were living. They were overjoyed. They bowed down and worshiped the newborn King, offering him expensive gifts—gold, incense, and myrrh.

God intervened to protect Jesus. He warned the Magi in a dream not to return to the heartless and heinous Herod. They took a different way home. Herod was furious. He knew Jesus was under two years old, because that’s what the Magi had told him. In his jealous rage, he commanded his men to slaughter all the baby boys under two years of age. They carried out his cruel command. Based on Bethlehem’s population at that time, it is estimated that fifteen to twenty babies were senselessly snuffed out. But he didn’t get his intended victim. An angel had warned Joseph in a dream to take his little family and flee to Egypt. In this way the words of Hosea the prophet were fulfilled, “Out of Egypt I called my son.”

Little did Herod realize it, but the Lord used this cold and calculating killer so that his Old Testament prophecies could be fulfilled. Through the death of the Innocents, another prophecy was fulfilled. Jeremiah had written, “A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.”

At a time of Christmas joy, the world was filled with lovelessness, cruelty, treachery, and brutality. But God was in control of it. He directed it to serve his saving plan. Yes, it was a tragedy that Herod slaughtered the Innocents (not innocent of sin, but innocent of any transgression against King Herod). But these Innocents were also God’s children, brought into his family through the covenant of circumcision—God’s seal of the promised Savior. As God’s children, through their death, they were received into eternal glory. They were the first people of the New Testament to die for Christ, but through Christ their death was the portal to paradise. Not only did the Lord fulfill prophecy through such evil men as Herod, but he displayed that such evil men cannot rob God’s people of eternal life.

On the Fourth day of Christmas, December 28, the Christian Church remembers the Holy Innocents. At this time of year, we marvel at the Christmas Miracle. We rejoice in the fact that God became man, cloaking himself in the same human flesh that we have. We remember that the Newborn King came into this world for one purpose: to shed his blood on the cross to cleanse us of our sins. But even as the joy of Christmas sweeps over us, we know that evil abounds all around us. It can cause us to become disheartened. So many people, like king Herod, are Christ-haters. They do what they can to snuff out the message of Jesus and his love. But take heart. Just as in the days of Herod and Jesus, so also today God is in control of all things in the world—even evil. We can be sure that he is directing the world’s history for the benefit of his saving plan and of his Church. He is controlling all things in order to bless our synod, our congregation, and our individual lives. May we in spirit travel with the Magi to Bethlehem, earnestly seeking out our Savior. Then, like the Magi, we will be overflowing with joy as we travel through this world of wickedness.

Pastor Zuberbier

After sharing this devotion with your family, take the time to read Matthew 2.