

The Second Week after the Nativity of Our Lord
Matthew 2:13-23

Last Monday, the church remembered the martyrdom of the Holy Innocents. We heard the account of their martyrdom in the Gospel reading this morning. It's a horrifying account of how Herod would go to any length to kill Jesus. He didn't want to share power with anyone. And he was evil.

Evil is the cause of suffering.

Men and women wanting another God than their creator is evil.

Men wanting to rape, pillage, and plunder is evil.

Men and women wanting illicit sexual pleasures at the expense of babies in the womb is evil.

Men and women serving power and self-gain at the expense of those they are called to serve is evil. It is evil whether it is on a familial, local, or national level.

Men, women, and children wanting pleasure instead of their God given responsibilities is evil.

Evil causes suffering.

Suffering is the reason many people have left Christianity, even in our own church.

If God were all powerful, surely He would fix the problem and allow no more suffering?

To fix the problem of suffering, you have to fix the source of suffering.

According to the Buddhist, suffering is caused by desire.

So their solution to ending suffering is to attempt to end desire. You make yourself a better person through exercises, habits, and meditation. Yet, somehow, this doesn't seem to work.

That makes sense to us at this time of year. It's the time of new year's resolutions. It's the time of dedicating yourself to self-improvement. It should be the time of realizing that you really aren't much better than you were last year.

Christianity isn't about making you a better person. Joel Osteen sells Christianity as some sort of self-help system so you can have your best life now. Anyone who's bought into his system, or one like it, finds out firsthand that when they compare themselves to the law, they just don't seem to be getting any better. And they certainly aren't living their best life now!

According to the Hindu, suffering is caused by someone's incomplete karma.

In that system, you strive, again through exercises, habits, and meditation, to become a better person and work off your karmic debt. Suffering is a part of the penance you must pay to work off that debt. Consequently, it leads to a cold treatment of the poor. After all, you don't want to mess up someone's karmic debt. This system also doesn't seem to work.

Christianity is not about working yourself out of your so-called karmic debt. In fact, when you look into the perfect mirror of the law, you realize an infinite number of lifetimes wouldn't be enough to pay off your debt to God.

The secular humanist has no basis to call anything evil or good. If that is the case, then suffering makes no sense to them. The government and science are looked to in order to fix all the problems of the world, however they define them. The curious thing is that the secular humanist seems to ignore his own evil and condemn the slightest evil found in other people.

These religions, and yes, I would equate secular humanism with religion, have no lasting answer to the problem of evil.

As Christians, we know that evil exists within ourselves.

We also know that evil hates the light.

As Jesus says through His apostle, John,

“The light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light.” (3:19-20)

Jesus came into the world and Herod hated Him.

Jesus escapes the slaughter of the innocents. Joseph takes Jesus and His blessed mother to Egypt. They don't come back until Herod is dead. This fulfills Scripture in three ways.

The slaughter of the innocents and the subsequent weeping and wailing fulfills prophecy found in Jeremiah 31:15:

*Thus says the Lord:
“A voice is heard in Ramah,
lamentation and bitter weeping.
Rachel is weeping for her children;
she refuses to be comforted for her children,
because they are no more.”*

The jealousy and rage of Herod causes this horrendous suffering.

The trip to and from Egypt fulfills prophecy found in Hosea 11:1

*When Israel was a child, I loved him,
and out of Egypt I called my son.*

Jesus is the new Israel. He represents all who were born of the seed of Abraham in the old covenant and all who are born of the seed of faith in the new covenant. His fate will determine the fate of all who are part of Israel which we now call the church.

Jesus being called a Nazarene is more complicated. It doesn't refer to a particular prophecy found in the Old Testament. Matthew could be using it to describe someone who is despised and rejected by mankind. This would also be reflected in our Lord's words from the cross found in Psalm 22:

*But I am a worm and not a man,
Scorned by mankind and despised by the people. (v. 6)*

It would also portray the image found in Isaiah 53:

*He was despised and rejected by men,
a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief;
and as one from whom men hide their faces
He was despised, and we esteemed Him not. (v. 3)*

It would also echo the words of Nathaniel the apostle:

Can anything good come out of Nazareth? (John 1:46)

All these and many other signs confirm to us that Jesus is the Messiah who has come to solve the problem of sin and suffering.

Jesus escaped the suffering of the holy innocents, but He does not escape suffering.

He is hounded during His ministry and suffers from weariness many times.

He suffers rejection by His own people. The ones who were eagerly waiting for Him.

He suffers from knowing what He must endure on the cross and from His Father in the Garden of Gethsemane and sweats blood because of it.

He suffers public crucifixion in the cruelest manner that's ever been devised.

He suffers the full wrath of His dear Father for the sin of the entire world even though He is blameless!

He confronts the problem of suffering face to face and defeats it!

He does it in a way that we don't expect.

An innocent Man is betrayed, wrongly convicted, and suffers for the sins of others.

In no other context would we call this good.

In fact, we would call it evil.

But what we call evil, God calls good.

There's a reason Good Friday is "Good" Friday.

And because Good Friday is Good, God can call evil good in another sense.

He takes a poor sinful being, splashes water on him, and gives him the name above all names! The name of God Himself.

And now suffering is sanctified.

The Christian does not seek suffering, but he or she doesn't shy away from it. He or she knows it is the price for bearing the name of Christ.

If Herod hated Christ so much, he slaughtered innocent babies to try and murder our Lord. How much more does Herod's father, Satan, hate you who are Christophers, or Christ-bearers?

This is why Peter says,

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. (1 Peter 4:12)

When we suffer, we bear one another's burdens.

When we suffer, we share in bearing the cross of Christ.

Martin Luther distinguished between the theologian of the cross and the theologian of glory.

The theologian of glory looks for answers to sin and suffering in self-help, psychology, and all manner of false religions.

The theologian of the cross looks for answers to sin and suffering in the only place it was actually addressed: Christ on the cross.

The theologian of glory looks to avoid suffering at any cost while striving to live his best life now.

The theologian of the cross embraces suffering knowing that God promises to make it work out for their good.

This does not mean that a theologian of the cross ignores suffering in others without trying to alleviate it.

The theologian of a cross calls a thing what it is.

Sin is sin and is ugly especially in one's self.

Suffering is the result of sin and is ugly.

Christ dealt with sin and suffering on the cross and this is the only place to find relief from both.

God suffers at the hands of evil men and defeats eternal suffering with His own suffering.

When you bear the name of Christ, you receive your own cross to bear.

God uses your suffering to save His people and glorify His name!

*Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power
and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen. (Rev. 7:12)*