



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Evangelical • Reformed • Catholic

A Gospel of Life

St. Matthew 2:13-18

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Holy Innocents

Christmas is a celebration. A few nights ago we were singing “O come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant... come and behold him, born the king of angels” or, “God rest you merry, gentlemen, let nothing you dismay, remember Christ our Saviour was born on Christmas Day; to save us all from Satan’s power when we had gone astray.” As we ended “Midnight Mass” on Christmas Eve those few of us gathered here sang out: “Good Christian men, rejoice, with heart and soul and voice; give ye heed to what we say: Jesus Christ is born today... Now ye need not fear the grave: Jesus Christ was born to save!” At Christmas we hear the incredible news that despite our rebellion against God, despite our cosmic treason, he came himself in the person of Jesus, becoming incarnate as one of us to save us from our sins and to inaugurate his kingdom. God hasn’t given up on his creation; he’s come to set it right himself. That’s something to celebrate and in the Church we celebrate it for twelve days.

And yet it’s interesting that we start these twelve days with three commemorations, two of which are of martyrs. The day after Christmas we remember St. Stephen, not only the first deacon, but also the first martyr, stoned to death for proclaiming the Good News to the Jews. And today we remember the Holy Innocents, slaughtered by King Herod. The Twelve Days of Christmas begin with a reminder that

Jesus and the Good News he brought were not and still are not welcomed by the world.

In our Gospel we read the angel’s warning to Joseph:

Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, “Out of Egypt I called my son.”

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. Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah:

“A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more.”
(Matthew 2:13-18)

We’ve talked a bit about Herod in our study of Luke so he should be a little familiar. Herod was king of Judea, but he wasn’t Jewish; he was half-Jewish – the child of a forbidden mixed marriage. The Romans set him up as a puppet king. Despite all of his building projects around Jerusalem, he was hated and despised by the Jews. He was so insecure on his throne that he murdered and exiled his own sons. The last thing he wanted to see was the long-expected Messiah come to throw out the Romans and their puppet king. He may have used the

title “King of the Jews,” but no one considered him such—that was the title of the coming Messiah. And so when the wise men came from the east looking for that King of the Jews, Herod was afraid. He trusted the wise men knew what they were doing when they went looking for the new king in Bethlehem, so he gave orders to have all the boys in Bethlehem two years old and younger slaughtered just to ease his fears.

But was he *truly* afraid that the Messiah had come or was he just being paranoid? From what we know of Herod, he wasn’t a very pious man. It’s unlikely, at least from what I’ve read of him, that he was pious enough to think that the Messiah had really come. But my reading about Herod does tell me that he was capricious and that the only life he valued was his own. I don’t think Herod truly feared that one of those little children in Bethlehem was likely to upset his throne. When he ordered their slaughter it was a “just in case” move on his part. He put no value on their lives. It was convenient for him and gave him a little bit more security—at the very least it sent the message that you don’t mess around with Herod and get away with it! We aren’t sure how many children died because of Herod’s decree, but Bethlehem was a small town—probably about 1000 people. Those who look at the demographics of the ancient world tell us that Herod’s decree probably resulted in about twenty children being murdered. Twenty little boys who lost their lives becomes Herod was afraid and because their deaths were politically expedient. These are the “Holy Innocents” that the Church commemorates today. And as we commemorate them and speak out against the fear and political expediency that led to their deaths two thousand years ago, our own church designates today a time to

commemorate the deaths of the unborn in our own country—more than *three million* murdered over the last forty-five years because, like Herod, people are afraid and because doing so is politically expedient. As we remember the injustice of Herod's murders, we Christians must speak out against the on-going injustice not only here in Canada, but in most of the world today.

As we remember that ten or twenty or maybe even thirty boys killed at Herod's orders, note that every day in Canada about 275 innocent children are killed in hospitals and clinics before they're even born. For every 100 live births, thirty children are aborted. And those numbers don't include children killed by the "morning after" pills or prevented from being implanted in the uterus because their mothers are on "the pill"—which results in the abortion of a fertilized egg *at least as often* as it prevents conception. In our province alone, forty children are aborted every day. Wednesdays are "abortion day" at the hospitals in Campbell River and Nanaimo. A surgeon who worked at Campbell River hospital several years ago explained that in each place one room is given over to an abortionist on those days and the women are lined up shoulder to shoulder to get in. One local nurse estimates that 20 to 25 abortions take place at *each* of those hospitals every Wednesday. We read about Herod's murder of twenty babies and toddlers and we're outraged! And yet even more children than that are killed in our province *every day*. Parliament eased the abortion laws in Canada in 1969, then in 1988, in the infamous Morgentaler case, the Supreme Court struck down all of the criminal code applying to abortion, thereby allowing completely unfettered access to abortion by anyone and under any circumstances. Based on

the most recent statistics—which only give us numbers through 2010 and are incomplete because our own province doesn't voluntarily report—almost 3.2 million children have been aborted in this country—roughly a quarter million more than the last time I was up here preaching on this subject in 2008.

Everyone cringes at the story of Herod's murder of the Holy Innocents, but when it comes to the millions of children murdered in the modern world by abortion, somehow we take it in stride. Here's the difference, I think, in the average person's mind: the children Herod killed were wanted, and those killed by abortion are unwanted. You see, it started in the 1920's with the birth control movement. Sadly not many churches have held out on the issue of birth control, yet it was an issue on which Christians up until about eighty years ago were unanimous in their agreement that it was a violation of both God's law and natural law. Martin Luther, the magisterial Reformer, described artificial birth control as something practiced by "swine". Today it's often seen as a Roman Catholic issue, but we forget that until very recently artificial birth control was something condemned by Romans and Protestants alike. Our culture bought into this movement and the natural consequence was the free-sex movement of the 1960s. Birth control "liberated" us from what we started calling the "consequences" of sex. And notice that: a child, which used to be considered a blessing, became a "consequence." And so it was only natural that the legalization of abortion would follow. If you don't want the child to start with, and then you have an "accident", the child becomes a "mistake", then it's only natural that somehow you've got to get rid of it. That's how we got here. All the arguments about

the health of the woman, about not being able to afford a child or not being able to care for a child—even the talk of rape and incest—are just window dressing. Those were just the argument used to convince the holdouts who still put value on children. The real issue is that the child wasn't wanted in the first place and now we've got to get rid of it. It all comes down to the fact that as a culture, we've come to place a low value on life.

And yet this is the very life that God lovingly created. The Holy Trinity existed in perfection before any created thing was ever made, and yet God in his great grace chose to create human life as a means to display his glory. Genesis describes it in terms of God creating Adam from the dust of the ground and *giving him life with his very breath*. God imparted to his creatures his own image. And when we rebelled and sinned against our Creator, he valued our lives enough to want to redeem them. We may not be passionate about life, but God is! He created it. He loves it. He didn't have a need to create us, but he created us anyway and gave us life *with his own breath*. And when we fell into sin and death, he restored us to life *by his own blood*.

Think of the ministry of Jesus Christ. In John 10:10 he says, "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." God saw that the life of his creation was sacred enough that he sent his own Son to redeem it. That's God's passion for life. He holds it as something holy, something sacred. But the fact that God sought to redeem his fallen creation reminds us that God is not just passionate about life—he's also passionate about grace. Again, he sent his only Son to die for us. That's grace. Grace is God's unmerited favour. He knew that in

our fallen state we are his enemies—we can do nothing good—and that our every inclination is to evil. Even our good deeds are tainted with selfish motives. And because God is both holy and just, he cannot tolerate our sin—even the smallest little bit of it. And that’s why God is so passionate about grace. Because in showing us grace through the death of Our Lord Jesus Christ, he glorifies himself by giving us the gift we can never earn on our own—the gift we can never merit. We deserve death and everlasting damnation, but because God values and is passionate about life and because he values and is so passionate about grace, he sent a Redeemer to be what we can never be and to restore us to his fellowship.

You might think that the subject of abortion is an ugly intrusion on the joy of Christmas, and yet there’s no better time to address it. Because at Christmas we celebrate the ultimate gift of life and grace—the Word Incarnate, born of the Virgin Mary—God himself stooping down and becoming one of us that he might give his life for ours.

So what does this mean for us as the Church? The greatest massacre in history is taking place and it’s taking place with the approval of our government—with the approval of those whom we elect to represent us. What do we do as the Church in response to what is easily the greatest sin ever committed by the human race? I see the Church responding in three different ways. Well, some might add a fourth. There *are* “churches” out there that have embraced this sin and whose people have promoted abortion, or at least it’s legality. I can’t say this clearly enough: that is not an option for us. Jesus has given us a gospel of life. To trade it in for a worldly gospel of death is cease to be the

Church. That is not an option. So what remains?

The first thing we could do is ignore the issue. We could simply chalk this problem up to a fallen world from which we’ve been redeemed. Or we could simply choose not to address it at all – to remain neutral. Maybe we could say, “This is a political issue and the Church isn’t supposed to get involved!” We can stick our fingers in our ears and sing *Amazing Grace* at the top of our lungs. And yet it’s not enough to sing about grace—we have to put it into action. And grace in action is concerned about God’s Truth. Grace in action sees a fallen and sinful world and desires to see it forgiven and redeemed. And redemption doesn’t happen until we’ve first confronted the reality of sin—the reality that we’re all fallen creatures in need of redemption. Grace demands that we take a stand for truth. We need to be as passionate about the truth as God is. Ignoring the problem—ignoring sin—isn’t the answer. Jesus didn’t ignore sin and neither can we.

So instead we could be like some Christians. We could take God’s Truth about sin seriously and we could stand on the street corner or in front of the abortion clinic and make sure that the women going in and the doctors and nurses and receptionists and office managers working there know they’re sinners. We could stand there shouting “murderer!” There are Christians that are passionate about life and who, who shout angrily, and who make sure people know the truth of their sins. We could do that and walk away from the abortion clinic satisfied that we’ve proclaimed the truth about abortion and the truth about life. We could walk away and hope that those people whom we told were murders will one day take it to heart, repent,

and come to the Church. Lots of Christians do that.

The problem is that it’s not just about proclaiming truth. We need to be just as passionate about proclaiming grace. Dear friends, it doesn’t do any good to point out the sin in another person’s life without also showing them the sin in our own lives and showing them the Saviour who died to take away the guilt of that sin.

Imagine a starving homeless man who is one day pulled aside, taken to a place to be fed and cleaned up, given a change of clothes, and given a good job. Suddenly his life is changed. Now can you imagine that man going back down to Skid Row where the rest of the homeless, hungry, and jobless are still hanging out—can you imagine him going back there and walking down the street, pointing his finger, and shouting, “Losers! You’re all a bunch of losers!” And yet that’s exactly what we’re doing when we stand up for truth by pointing out the sins of others without sharing with them the reason for hope. We need to go back to the people still on the street and show them where we found food and clothes and a job. They need to see that we’re not perfect—that we’ve been cleaned up, but still have some of that dirt and grime from the street under our fingernails. We can’t condemn without at the same time leading those sinners to the Saviour.

That’s what grace is all about. Knowledge of sin is part of God’s plan of grace, but the heart of grace is redemption. And that’s why we need to be the kind of Christians—the kind of church—that is willing to take a stand alongside the men and women contemplating and hurting from abortion. They need to know that it’s the wrong choice—that it’s

sin—but they also need to be shown the Redeemer. They need to know that we care as much about them and their eternal well-being as we do about saving the lives of their unborn children. You see, grace acknowledges that there’s a gash across the souls of each and every one of us because our sins offend God. Grace seeks not only to affirm the Truth, but it provides forgiveness and healing. Grace restores the fallen and the wounded. Grace condemns the sin, but it also points to Jesus Christ.

Remember that St. James tells us talk is cheap. When people are hurting, they usually need more than us quoting a few Bible verses at them about hope and faith and salvation. They need to see the Gospel at work in us. They need to see us being the hands and feet of the Saviour. To paraphrase James: If a young girl is being thrown out by her parents because she chose to keep her baby, and one of you says, “Good for you! Go in peace and be warmed and filled, but doesn’t provide the support she needs, what good is that?” As the Church it’s not only necessary to encourage women to choose life, we need to be there to help them, to stand with them when the storm of consequences hits them. As Christian we can’t just point out sin and walk away. We need to put our arms around the sinner and mourn with them knowing that we are sinners too. Then we need to stand with them and give them our support as they seek to repent and follow after God.

Frederica Matthewes-Green writes that as she was researching for her book, *Life Choices*, she spent two years asking post-abortive women what the reasons were for their abortions. She expected answers like, “I’m too young to have a child”, “I don’t have the money”, or

“I want to get my school or career underway first”. But in 88% of cases, the reason was that someone close to the woman, usually a relative or friend, put pressure on her to have the abortion. In 88% of the cases it was the pressure from *one* other person. Imagine what could be done if, as Christians, we did what we’re supposed to do in showing grace to women like these. Imagine the influence for life that could be had if there were only one or two *other* people influencing these women to choose life, and then committing to stand beside them and providing the support and resources they need in the months or years ahead? Imagine if we showed these women the face of Jesus. Imagine if we showed them the grace of God.

In conclusion let me say: *our mission is a Gospel mission*. As he was ascending to heaven, Jesus didn’t tell his disciples, “Go out and form Pro-Life groups and save babies.” No, he gave us the task of proclaiming the Gospel and making disciples. We are to stand up for Truth as Christians. We are to take a stand against evil in this world. But our primary duty is the world’s conversion to Jesus Christ.

And that’s the problem with so much of what I see going on today. For the last century or more Christians have been lazy. Because we lived in a predominantly Christian culture we forgot Christ’s Great Commission. Ultimately, the Church in too many ways has only herself to blame for the godless society we now live in. We live in a post-Christian age, because for too long we forgot the task of evangelism. Is it any wonder that there’s little value for life when there’s no value in the culture for God and his Gospel of grace? Don’t misunderstand me. We *do* need to be on the street helping those in need and doing what it takes to help

women choose life. And we *do* need to work for laws and legislation that protect life, but the bottom line is that if we aren’t about the business of the Great Commission—of making new disciples—our culture will turn further and further from God. If all we do is legislate morality and march in protest of the world’s sins we’ll be fighting a losing battle. The only way to have a country and a culture that follow God’s ways is to have a culture of people that desire and follow after God. The only way to have a Christian culture is to go out and make more Christians. And, brothers and sisters, the best way to carry out the Great Commission is to truly *live* the grace that has been shown to us by Jesus Christ. Don’t just speak it; live it and make it real for those around you. As we sang on Christmas: “Christ was born for this! Christ was born for this!”

Please pray with me: Our Father, as we look at the great sin taking place in our world and especially considering abortion, we first and foremost ask for your forgiveness. We, your Church, have failed so often in the mission you have given us. We have been lazy in proclaiming your Good News and we have often been lazy in *living* your Good News. Have mercy on us and on our land, Father. And give us a profound understanding of your grace, that we might preach it and live it in this fallen world, that our culture might be redeemed and follow your ways as it sees you at work in us. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.