

December 30, 2007

The Mark

Well, here we are the Sunday after Christmas. You made it through Christmas week. If your family is like mine it may have been a fairly hectic week but when I look back I smile. Christmas is such a wonderful time. I love the Christmas Eve service; singing silent night is always a highlight. I always close my eyes and let my mind wander back to what that first Christmas must have been like. My image probably isn't very realistic it's greatly influenced by the images of the nativity I've seen over the years. It is an image of quiet solitude and peace, of awe and wonder, with shepherds humbly bowing before the manger. I find myself wanting to linger but as with the shepherds who had to get back to their sheep, I too have to return to reality. But I am thankful that Christmas lingers for twelve days until Epiphany replaces it in the church year on January 6th. Today is the last in my sermon series of a "traditional church celebrates a traditional Christmas."

So what is the tradition for this, the first Sunday of Christmas? Well, you actually heard it in our readings. Today is officially known as "the slaughter of the innocence Sunday." It's a Sunday that pulls us right back to the reality of this world. There is evil present and evil knows no bounds. We see it today in Rwanda, Darfur and Iraq as innocents are killed. We see it in all of western civilization as babies are aborted because people couldn't show restraint or self control, we see it in evil governments nothing has changed in this regard evil is alive and well. Herod was the epitome of evil; here was a ruler who gave himself the title of "Herod the Great". To make sure that he would remain and be remembered as great he divided his kingdom into four provinces so that at his death four of his sons could rule a province. Now you might say what's wrong with that, that's fatherly love and concern. No, he did it because he wanted none of his sons to be considered as great, they would be called Herod also but the Herod not so great, this is the Herod who thought nothing of killing members of his own family including his beloved wife when he thought she might be scheming against him. The same Herod, who

gave an order from his deathbed in Jericho to slaughter the leading citizens of Jericho so that there would be weeping and mourning when he died. As Herod's power grew so did his paranoia; a familiar progression that dictators around the world have shown to this day. So it isn't surprising that Herod doesn't bat an eye at the thought of killing innocent babies.

Through the wise men he heard there was a new king and through the priests he heard that there was a potential of a Messiah. What's a king to do? Make sure that you get that baby before he has a chance to grow up. Kill all male children two years old and younger in Bethlehem and all the countryside around it. This is the equivalent of a small nuclear strike. With nuclear weapons you don't have to hit the target exactly just decimate the entire region and you assure your success. Yes, this is evil but one might ask, where does evil come from? Or as one e-mail I recently received said, "If God created everything then he created evil too." Now that's an interesting play on logic but that e-mail also gave two wonderful examples of the phallicity of such a statement. Consider, did God create darkness? No, God made light darkness is simply the absence of light, darkness is the lack of what God made. Consider, did God create cold? No, God created heat again, in light heat comes, the sun is heat even the metabolism of life generates heat. For you and me its 98.6 degrees worth of it, cold is the lack of heat, the lack of what God made. Take away the life that God gave you and you are dead. So it is with evil God created all that is good, He said it each day at the end of creation, "Behold it is good."

Through Adam and Eve, however, the choice of sin, that which misses the mark of God, comes evil. That's what sin is; it's an archery term. If you don't hit the mark, the bull's-eye, you sin, you miss the mark. When we don't live as God created us to live, which was good, then we miss the mark and there is evil. Just as if you miss the button on the flashlight there is darkness, the heater plug misses the outlet there is a lack of heat it is cold. Herod's action this Sunday reminds us of why Jesus came; mankind has sinned man's heart is evil and man continues to sin. We miss the mark and the result is evil.

God saw this and realized we were doomed to failure. This is why Isaiah says in Isaiah 63:7-9, "I will tell you the kindness of the Lord, the deeds for which he is to be praised, according to all the LORD has done for us-yes, the many good things he has done for the

house of Israel. According to his compassion and many kindnesses. He said, 'Surely they are my people, sons who will not be false to me'; and so he became their Savior. In all their distress he too was distressed, and the angel of his presence saved them. In his love and mercy he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old." God brought goodness back to His creation in the person of his only son, Jesus Christ. His goodness came with a definite purpose. The writer to the Hebrews puts it this way in Hebrews 2:14-18, "Since the children (that would be you and me) have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death-that is, the devil-and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham's descendants. For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted."

Yes there is evil, a lack of God in this world. But there is an answer God in the flesh, Jesus Christ, God incarnate, who became flesh so that he might know what we go through, so that he might become merciful and faithful and be that high priest who offered himself. He came to defeat evil to defeat its cousin death. So just as we celebrate the joy of Christmas we look forward to the New Year knowing what's coming. Not far from now we will experience the shame and ugliness of Lent, followed by the indescribable awe of Easter. Why can I say this? Because Jesus, God's Son, the Savior Isaiah spoke of, became flesh and he did not miss the mark. May this be our new year's resolution to throw off all that is evil, all that misses the mark and dedicate ourselves to hitting the mark and living for Him.

In our Savior's name, Amen.