

The Second Sunday after the Feast of the Nativity of our Lord
St. Matthew 2:13-23
January 2nd, 2022
Sts. Peter and Paul Ev. Lutheran Church, UAC
Simpsonville, SC
Pastor Jerald Dulas

An Angel of the Lord Appeared to Joseph

In Nomine Iesu!

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Prayer in Pulpit before Sermon:

O Lord, send out Thy Light and Thy Truth, let them lead us. O Lord, open Thou my lips, that my mouth may show forth Thy praise. O Lord, graciously preserve me, lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be rejected. Amen.

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior + Jesus Christ. Amen.

Every great meal, every great feast will include a variety of flavors—not just sweet, but also sour or bitter or salty. Think of a turkey served with jellied cranberries and dressing. Or, think of a sweet and sour sauce. Sweets all alone do not make for much of a feast, at least in a meal that has any substance. It needs salt and bitter and sour, too. Christmas is no exception to this rule. The feast of Christmas is, in all its fullness, a bitter-sweet mixture of sorrow and joy, birth and death, fear and faith. We know the sweet parts—the cute and cuddly Baby wrapped in swaddling cloths. The angels announcing his birth. The adoring shepherds. The mysterious Magi worshiping the Child and opening costly treasures. How sweet the Nativity of our Lord is! The Lord and Creator of the universe comes as a tiny, helpless little Baby, the second Adam born to save the human race. Like candy canes and hot chocolate, we enjoy its sweetness. And we should enjoy it because sweets are meant to be enjoyed, and enjoyed without the burden of guilt.

But the Lord God has put more than sweet receptors on our tongues. There are also salt and sour and bitter receptors. In fact, about one third of the population has salt receptors that are somehow crossed up with their sweet receptors and they can taste sweet better when salt is added. This is why there is such a thing called “salted caramel.” This includes all those who put salt their watermelon and think that it tastes good. The Lord God has rigged our bodies to live on more than just sweets alone. In fact, a diet of sweets alone will eventually make it seem that one’s clothes have shrunk. A diet of Christmas sugar without its necessary bitterness and saltiness becomes spiritual candy instead of solid food, dessert instead of a feast, with not much staying power to hold you through to another year, or even to Good Friday and Easter. And so, on this Ninth day of Christmas, we have a sour and bitter dish to go with our Christmas sweets.

Christmas is probably the shortest and bloodiest season of the whole Church’s year. One would not think it, but it is. We start with the birth of the Lord + Jesus, and the blood that comes with birth. Then on December 26th we have St. Stephen’s Day and the stoning of St. Stephen, the martyr. On December 28th is the Festival of the Holy Innocents, as we remember those little baby boys of Bethlehem who died at the hands of wicked and jealous King Herod. Yesterday we celebrated the Festival of the Circumcision of our Lord + Jesus, where He shed His first blood for us poor sinners. Today, the slaughter of the children of Bethlehem is a part of the Gospel for the Second Sunday after Christmas. We hear Rachel weeping for her children, because they are no more. There is much blood

spilt during the Christmas season.

This is hardly the stuff of a holly, jolly Christmas: a slaughter of little children; of baby boys two years old and younger. Now this was probably not too many, given the size of Bethlehem at the time, but even one murder of a baby, born or unborn, is too many. And though we would just as soon gloss over this terrible episode, it is frightfully important stuff. As the Apostle and Evangelist St. Matthew reminds us three times in today's Gospel reading, these things happened to fulfill what was spoken of by the Prophets. In other words, these events were set in motion long before they ever happened. They are not little accidents; little random happenings. These things happened to fulfill the words of the Prophets, to fill them up with their ultimate meaning.

That the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Joseph had to hurry the Lord + Jesus out of the country and seek safety in Egypt, of all places, was no accident. "*Out of Egypt have I called my Son,*" the prophet Hosea said. This little Baby born to the Virgin Mary is the embodiment of Israel; He is literally a one-man Israel, seeking shelter in Egypt, just as the sons of Jacob once did, and then returning to Israel. He lives out in his own flesh the pattern of exile and return, death and resurrection. This is what the Lord + Jesus is all about. He is the fulfillment of the Old Testament in His very own Person.

That King Herod, in rage and jealousy, kills all the baby boys in the vicinity of Bethlehem two years and under is no accident. A political atrocity, yes, but no accident. Rachel, the beloved wife of Jacob, the grandmother of Ephraim and Manasseh, was long accustomed to weeping for her children. She wept when her firstborn son Joseph was believed to be killed by wild animals. And now Rachel weeps again for little children killed by the sword. In their deaths they are "martyrs," they bear witness to the death of God's Son, the innocent One who gave His life for us all. You might say that the little ones died that day for no other reason than they resembled the Lord + Jesus—baby boys two years old and under. Remember them well. The double-edged sword of Politics and false Religion will always swing against those who resemble Christ in His humility.

We call these baby boys of Bethlehem the "holy innocents," not because they were holy or innocent on their own nor by the tragic way they died, but because they were in death gathered into the one Death that conquers death, the death of Bethlehem's Baby Boy named + Jesus. They were sinners, all of them, right down to the tiniest infant, as every child is conceived and born in sin. They were circumcised under the Law, baptized (in an Old Testament sense) into the death of the Lamb of God named + Jesus. They were holy in the Lord + Jesus' holiness, innocent in His innocence. Their deaths, tragic and painful as they were, are precious in God's sight, as is the death of all God's children in the death of His Child + Jesus.

That St. Joseph and the Blessed Virgin Mary eventually settled in Nazareth in Galilee also fulfills the word of the prophets. "He shall be called a Nazarene." The Son of God born in Bethlehem grows up in no-name Nazareth, a backwater joint that never produced anything good, literally as far from power and glory and Religion and Politics as one could get. Or as the old saying went, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" and the answer was a definite "not a chance in the world."

All of these things together show us how the Lord God works—hiddenly, subversively, under a hasty flight to Egypt and Rachel's tears at funerals for little ones and no-name Nazareth in Galilee. It also tells us that the Lord God works good out of all things, whether it be a hasty flight to Egypt, Bethlehem's babies, or Nazareth. All of these things are woven in a wonderful tapestry called our salvation and life in the Lord + Jesus. From our perspective, we see the backside of the tapestry—all knotted and ugly, loose ends, dangling threads, things that make no sense. And that is how salvation looks from this side of things. It is a whole bunch of loose ends and dangling threads that do not seem to make any sense; that should not happen, if we were running the universe.

These things also remind us that the Lord God does not stick His hand out and fix things every time something bad happens. He could, and He occasionally does, but not ordinarily. The Lord God is not much into the way we picture His intervention. Instead, He is content to let things pretty much be with things as they are. He is the Lord God of the weedy wheat field, Who allows the weeds to keep growing among the wheat. He is the Lord God of the parable of the dragnet that hauls all sorts fish, both good and bad, to the shore to be sorted out at the Last Judgment. He is the Lord God Who kept company with sinners, Who came to seek and to save the entire lost human race and draw all to Himself in His death and Who said "it is finished" at His death on the cross once and for all.

The Lord God could have put out a hit on old King Herod, like He did with a later Herod about thirty years later who got a nasty case of worms and died for not giving the Lord God the glory. But God did not do that. He just let old Herod be until he dropped dead on his own. And the only intervention was another one of those dreams St. Joseph had by an angel telling him to take the Virgin Mary and the Baby Boy and flee to Egypt until it was safe to return. How come only St. Joseph gets a dream? That does not seem terribly fair to the boys of Bethlehem. Little Lord + Jesus gets whisked off to safety and the rest of the playground gets slaughtered. The Lord God lets it be and reconciles all these deaths in the death of His Son on Good Friday.

The Lord God could have chosen a respectable place for His Son to grow up. Every parent wants the best for his child, do they not? But backwoods, no-name Nazareth is the neighborhood of choice for the Lord God's Messiah, growing up among the sawdust and shavings of a carpenter's shop, playing with St. Joseph's saws and planes. The Messiah, the Savior of the world, the Word, Who made us, hanging out in Nazareth until His hour comes.

On this ninth and unsweet but savory day of Christmas, as we think about the holy family's flight into Egypt, and the horrible death of Bethlehem's baby boys, and the nowhere place called Nazareth that our Lord + Jesus would call home. Think of God as the collector of loose ends, making the biggest ball of loose ends there ever was and tying them all together in the death of the Lord + Jesus. The Lord God makes good out of the worst we do and the worst that is done to us, reconciling it all in the death of our Lord + Jesus. Every last seemingly minor or meaningless detail is under His Lordship, His control.

This means that the whole messed up ball of a world is redeemed by the Lord God in the death of the Lord + Jesus and there are no loose ends with Him. Every sin is atoned for. There is forgiveness for everyone who believes on Him. Every life, every death has meaning only in the life and death of the Lord + Jesus. Every senseless death finds its meaning and its fulfillment in the death and resurrection of the Son of God, Who embraced the world in His death on a Friday that we call good. Out of the bitterness of Rachel's tears, look again at God's Child, in a manger and given for you in Holy Baptism, in His Word, in the Supper of His Body and Blood. How sweet the gift of salvation in our Lord + Jesus is! In the Name of our Lord + Jesus Christ. Amen.

Prayer in Pulpit after Sermon:

Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto Thy Name give glory! I will extol Thee, O Lord, and I will praise Thy Name forever and ever. Amen.

The Votum:

The peace of God, which passeth all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!