

First Sunday After Christmas – 2019

Isaiah 63:7-14

Galatians 4:4-7

Matthew 2:13-23

There is a very real fight against God. Sinful man is bent, twisted, and his heart is deceitful above all things (Jeremiah 17:9). It is a futile fight, on man's part, but evil is not always rational. Evil is certainly capable of great damage, great harm. Deranged, demented, left on its own evil will go to the farthest reaches to achieve its desired end.

His name was Herod, but evil's name is legion. King Herod was a politician who killed babies in order to retain power. Does that sound familiar? Herod was the product of a demonic line that also included the Pharaoh of Egypt who fed Israelite boys to the Nile. Behind the culture of death is the ancient serpent.

The church is called to take notice that the Lord Christ was born into a hostile environment. Does it seem to you that our Christmas joy is tempered by the account of the first martyrs, the Holy Innocents, the male babies in and around Bethlehem who were murdered because of their association to Christ? It is indeed a curious life we live, we Christians. As much true joy that we have in this life, we also live beneath a great cross. Goodness is truly hated. What is patently evil is lifted up as an indispensable good by those whose fight is ultimately with God.

Why did Cain hate his brother? Why did Cain kill Abel? Abel offered a sacrifice that was pleasing to God, and Cain did not. Abel's sacrifice was offered in faith (Hebrews 11:4). There is no such thing as generic faith. One is either connected to Christ and His righteousness or one is not. Faith always has been and always will be centered on the sacrifice of the Son of God. Abel had that faith and offered his sacrifice as an extension of that faith. Cain rejected God's promise, had no faith, and hate was his spiritual character. Cain murdered Abel but his hate was for God.

Cain and Herod are brothers, allies, kinsmen. Others bear their mark – Jezebel, Herodias, Nero. There is a strange and dark alliance between fallen man and the prince of hell. Satan's ancient devices are mimicked by men who hate God and want to depose Him. For those of you who want to be biblically informed as to what is going on around you, I offer three equally powerful passages of Scripture. Here is the first: "We do not struggle against flesh and blood, but against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Galatians 6:12). There is a spiritual realm in, with, and under this creation. The fight there is fierce, the warfare long. The instruments of war are not concrete. The sword of this fight, the sword we bear, the sword of the Spirit, is the Word of God. You are called upon to use it. For yourself and others; for the kingdom; for the culture of life.

The second is from our Lord's mouth. Jesus said: "This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed" (John 3:19-20 NIV). Hatred of the light is hatred for God and His Christ. This hatred is not

merely content to hide in the shadows but will strive to eliminate those things that pain their soul – the Word of God, Christ’s church, and those who are vessels of light. Sin doesn’t want to be exposed. Those who are engaged in habitual sin will not voluntarily give up their debauchery. Something must change their heart. That is Christ’s work, the work of the Spirit, the work of the Word. This is the Word we speak; the Word by which we endeavor to live our lives.

The final passage to sear into your mind is from the book of Revelation, chapter 12. Satan is cast out of heaven. Michael and his angels conquer the ancient dragon by the blood of the Lamb and the Word of their testimony. The salvation and the power and kingdom of our God and the authority of His Christ win the day. But the passage brings a solemn warning. “Woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has been thrown down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short! (Revelation 12:12). The devil is said to pursue the woman (who is both Mary and the Church). By God’s providence, she escapes. Note well this verse. “Then the dragon became furious with the woman and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus” (Revelation 12:17).

That, dear brother, is you. That, dear sister, is you. You are in this conflict. It is both cowardly and futile to attempt to be Switzerland. Chose this day, and every day that you rise from your bed, whom you will serve. The sons of Levi rallied to Moses’ side during the Golden Calf debacle. Martin Luther stood on the doctrine of grace alone and would not be moved. We are no less. We are sons of the Light, daughters of the Day. Because we are of Christ, we will have trouble in this world, but we take heart, for Christ has overcome the world (John 16:33).

Hear now how our Gospel text from St. Matthew points to Christ’s work then and now. Mary, when she visited her cousin Elizabeth, she marveled at what God would do through her. She gave voice to the sweetest of biblical songs, the Magnificat. “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior” (Luke 1:46). Listen to this line: “For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed” (Luke 1:48). So said the blessed Virgin. And she is forced to escape a murderous sword which sweeps through Bethlehem. And she is forced to dash to Egypt, knowing no one, to safeguard her Son. Her life was a tumult. Her familial stability was chaotic. A very real threat breathed on her neck. So, was she blessed in all of this? It is a question that will help you understand who you are, how to make sense of what is going on around you. Do you believe that her circumstances were quietly ordered, providentially ordered for her benefit? Do you believe that you are less valuable to the Father? Do you believe that He is less capable of taking care of you? Do you believe that all must be Lake Placid in your life for the Father’s hand to be upon you? Hmmm.

A sword pierced her heart. As Simeon prophesied, so it came to be. She saw her Son crucified; horribly tormented, the One she carried, the One she raised. In truth, He was the One who protected her. Even as they fled to Egypt, the Lord Christ, infant, watched over them, protected them, even as He was held at her hip. And those babies, did our Lord desert them, leaving them abandoned to Herod’s murderous sword? No. Let these babies come to Me and do not hinder them. In death, in martyrdom, those Holy Innocents received the crown of life. Life descended upon Bethlehem as Christ was born. He was in solidarity to those babies, as He is to us. For them the Son of God lived a life of absolute purity, absolute love, absolute fidelity to His Father and His neighbor. Christ crucified opened the Kingdom of Heaven and those babies entered that

Kingdom with joy. They died on Christ's behalf, didn't they? Those boys died solely because of their association with Christ, didn't they?

Those little lambs were protected by the Good Shepherd. Those boys are treasures of the church, icons of our life in Christ, and precisely what all of us should strive to be. We died with Christ when we were baptized. Death has no mastery over Him, it has no mastery over us. To be sure, the grief in Bethlehem was tremendous. Rachel weeping for her children! The cry of dereliction emanating from that town was heart wrenching. Those mothers, how they hurt. Those fathers, the ache in their stomach was like broken glass. And the Lord comforts. Weeping may remain for a night. Resurrection is our morning, the dawn of life, the hope that allows us to grieve and still know that God is working all things together for good. Our Lord is triumphant. In the fullness of time, He allowed evil to do its worst. He conquered it. Our God reigns. From the tree, He reigns. In the tumult of our lives, He reigns. Risen and glorious, He reigns. Job is our Sherpa to where joy is to be found. "I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has thus been destroyed, yet in my flesh shall I see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another" (Job 19:25-27). In the light of those words, our Christmas joy is full.