

Christ the Lord Episcopal Church Pinole, CA

Holy Innocents: December 31, 2023

“As so this is Christmas”

Rev. Dr. Lois Williams

Good morning and welcome to Christ the Lord Church as we celebrate Holy Innocents: those children who, through no fault of their own, lost their lives. As you can imagine, we can begin with Biblical times. All throughout history and even today as we listen to the news; there seems to have always been, and continues to be, collateral damage. Innocent lives are lost due to human pride, greed and the lust for power.

I begin today with the song that echoes in my mind this time of year: John Lennon singing, “So this is Christmas, and what have you done, another year over, and a new one just begun.” He of course ends the song with the mantra, “war is over if you want it, war is over now.” However, as of this morning, my understanding is war is not over, and it is not ending now.

Today’s scripture tells the story of Joseph being warned to take Mary and baby Jesus and flee. In fact, they flee to Egypt which, as we know, did and still does have a dicey relationship with Israel. Joseph heeds the warning and Jesus will have the opportunity to grow up to become a young man.

As I preached earlier at Christmas, I often wonder if God does have a plan B, because now it is Joseph who has to have the faith to believe in God’s message and actually leave the area. What if he had not? This brings up an interesting phenomenon. God seems to inform and request, but the actual physical move forward, for those being summoned, always needs a response of choice and we witness those called saying “yes”.

But what of those children left behind and murdered? Is this the doing of God? And, let's face it, there are just some things in this world that make you ask, "If God is a loving God, how can he let these things happen?" If God is all powerful *and* good then how can there be evil in the world? No doubt you've heard this question before. Either God is good but powerless to prevent evil, or he *is* all powerful, but the existence of evil proves that he is not good. Believers and unbelievers alike have been wrestling with this question in one form or another for millenia.

God gave each and every one of us free will and the wisdom to discern His will. Yet, by our own conscious choice and abuse of our freedom, we choose to be selfish and to entertain the wicked temptations. This begs the question, "How can we, as God's children, allow the slaughter of the holy innocents; allow this to continue to happen?"

Our scriptures are pointing out the difference between those who say yes to God's calling, and those who blatantly go against what they know is right. Blinded by the passions of the world.

So, we wish to get off the hook for our actions. And while I don't believe anyone in this room would hurt someone, lest a child, we participate in a society where our thoughts, words and actions do have consequences. Our vote, where we spend our money, and how we find solace in our faith, all lead to choices of listening to the humble message of a babe in a manger, or supporting the greedy, power-hungry people and infrastructure, like Herod that continues the rally against humanity itself.

We need to ask ourselves is it God's will or ours?

In our attempt to often feel better or at least less responsible, we try to construct a God who will compel us to be good. We want a God who will fix us against our own will, who will take away our violence and our self-interest and our selfish fears, who will not

permit us to lash out at the weak, who will write the Law in our hearts in such a way that we are not able to resist it. And God refuses to do that. God will not act as another power in the realm of the powers. God will not/cannot be one coercive power among competing other powers, not even the greatest of all coercive powers. Because that would serve simply to validate a universe of violence.

Through Jesus, through the baby that is saved today, God will demonstrate love, suffer and die (at the very hands of his own people.) Jesus will not force Pilot to change his mind, or strike him down, nor use Divine power to remove himself from the cross. Jesus took on the suffering at the cross, even for the Holy Innocents that were not spared when he was.

And so, for as far we can look into any foreseeable human future, given our nature to sin, the children will continue to be killed. Abel's sacrifice in Genesis is accepted by God, and his brother Cain's is not. Cain kills his brother because he is angry. Cain will not obey the voice of God. Instead, Cain's anger smolders and bitterness takes over. The same anger and bitterness and love of power also overtakes Herod. Even as hundreds and hundreds of years pass, humanity becomes a cesspool of wickedness and violence. Some of the saddest words in the Bible are horrors of brother against brother.

Steven Charleston reminds us, "If anyone else thinks this coming year is going to be something of a wild ride, please feel free to join me in getting ready for it. Get some rest. Don't sweat the small stuff. And tune up your prayer life. In our community we will be doing all we can to support one another. We will be listening for the voice of the Spirit. We will be watching for our chance to make a positive contribution. So, stay in good spiritual shape and pace yourself for the marathon of hope."

And so, this is Christmas, and what have we done? Today we have taken a moment to recognize the darkest side of humanity, while shining light into the chasm with hope.

And so, this is Christmas, and what have we done? We have given the nameless that have been lost innocently, a moment to regain their humanity, to recognize they are our brothers and sisters.

And so, this is Christmas and what have we done? We have gathered to pray, strengthen our faith and hope as a community, while the world remains at war. Because we know that all the holy innocent are not really lost, they are with Christ and all the martyrs. And this New Year we prepare for the marathon of hope. Amen.