

# Finding Christ in Christmas

## Christmas 1A

Text: Matthew 2:13–23

December 30, 2007    **There's Nothing Gentle about Christmas**

Whenever we think of the Christmas story,  
idyllic images and gentle icons  
immediately come to mind—

- the mother and child asleep on the hay...
- the animals in the stable nestled in the straw not making a sound...
- watchful shepherds tending their grazing sheep...
- the choir of angels singing *Gloria in Excelsis Deo*.

But there is nothing gentle about Christmas.

Today, these peaceful images of the Nativity are shattered  
by Matthew's account of the slaughter of the Holy Innocents.

Matthew jars Luke's idyllic story of the birth of the Christ-child in the stable  
with the cruel sounds of death piercing the night.

The blood of the Holy Innocents is being shed by Herod  
as he tries to save his crown from the new born king.

*Rachel is weeping*, says Matthew,  
for lives cut short by soldiers who have  
come to Bethlehem to carry out Herod's orders.

But alas for Herod, the blood of the Holy Innocents is not the end of the story.  
The blood of the Martyrs  
is the seed of God's kingdom.

Herod would never be able to understand this paradox of God's kingdom,  
nor would he be able to believe the plots and the twists  
God can cook up to accomplish his purposes in the world.

Unbeknownst to Herod, his diabolical plan plays right into God's hand.  
Not only does he fail to save his crown  
—his bloody reign will soon come to an end—  
his violent act will play a key part in setting the stage for  
God's mighty act of salvation given through  
the life...and ministry...of his Son.

As we look back to the manger, the blood of the Holy Innocents is prophetic.  
The child that King Herod wants to kill fulfills the promise of God—  
he fulfills God's holy will.

This child will grow to be a man whose blood will be shed—  
not to save a crown—  
but to give the crown of God's kingdom  
to all who believe in him.

Frank Hinnant had no use for Christmas.

Head of his own multimillion dollar business,  
he was the quintessential Scrooge.

He gave no Christmas bonuses to any of his employees.

There was a reason for his  
ill-humor at Christmas.

Many years before, David, Frank's eighteen-month-old son, had died.  
Because Christmas was such a special time for children,  
it always reminded him of his painful loss.

One December morning Frank decided to walk to work instead of drive.

On the way, he passed by a nativity scene  
in a department store window.

He tried to ignore the radiant smiles of Mary and Joseph  
as they gazed down at the baby Jesus.  
But he couldn't ignore them completely.

Next, he passed *Holy Innocents Orphanage*—what a strange name he thought.  
*Holy Innocents—wasn't that the title given to all the babies who were  
murdered by King Herod's men around the time of Jesus' birth?*

Suddenly, Frank realized that the Christmas story  
doesn't end with the words,  
*And they lived happily ever after.*

In that moment, Frank had an epiphany.  
He realized there is more to Christmas than sweetness and joy.  
There is misery too.

Christmas is not only a story about birth;  
it is a story of death...and lust for power—  
it is a story of unjust social systems...and innocence sacrificed.

Frank went inside and visited with  
the staff and children at the orphanage,  
and the experience changed his life.

That evening as they dined alone,

Frank told his wife Adele what had happened—  
how he had tried to ignore the nativity scene in the window  
and wound up seeing the name of the orphanage and visiting it.

He described it as a dreary place  
full of sad children who were desperate  
for attention from a caring adult.

Moved by the sight of those children,

Frank donated a large amount of money to the orphanage that very day,  
and the directors soon made plans to build a new wing with his gift.

Frank told Adele, the wing would be named in honor of their son David.

Adele marveled at the change in her husband.

It was the first time in 22 years Frank had mentioned his son's name.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus' birth is no gentle icon...it is no peaceful idyll.  
 His birth happened amid death—within the squalor of a stable—  
 but in that dingy stable, God's gracious love came to save us all.

As we celebrate this Christmas season and the birth of our Lord,  
 beyond the sweet sounds of the carols  
 that ring in our ears,  
 there is the sound of Rachel weeping  
 for the Holy Innocents who are  
 eternally sleeping with the Lord.

Her tears of sorrow for lives cut short serve to remind us  
 how great is the cost—how great is the price—  
 of the gift of forgiveness and life  
 that saves us from eternal separation from God.

Herod's slaughter of the Holy Innocents is a stark reminder that life is hard.  
 The world is in many ways a scary place,  
 but evil does not have the last word.

Karen Tucker tells about an especially meaningful Christmas pageant  
 that took place at her church.  
 It began as a traditional pageant, with the children  
 dressed as shepherds and angels and donkeys and such.

As the congregation sang,  
 miniature versions of Mary and Joseph  
 walked solemnly up the aisle and knelt by the manger.  
 But then something totally unexpected happened.

The girl playing Mary  
 pulled back the blanket swaddling her baby Jesus  
 to reveal that it was really a wooden cross.  
 Then she lifted up that cross and held it over the manger,  
 reminding the whole congregation of  
 the real meaning of Christmas.<sup>2</sup>

While seemingly out of character with Christmas,  
 the blood of the Holy Innocents is prophetic.  
 It points us to Christ's own  
 death..  
 He bleeds for us and he dies for us  
 to give us new life  
 and set our souls free.

The babe asleep in the manger was born to die.  
 Yes, this can be a cruel world,  
 but beyond the cross  
 is the empty tomb.

Christmas is not about soft schmaltzy crèches.  
It comes to us amid the harsh reality of the world's  
selfishness and greed...and violence and indifference.

Christ enters the world in this humble way  
to overcome death  
and, through his death,  
to bring the gift of eternal life to the world.

In his death, the seeds of life are sewn—  
the gospel story will make that perfectly clear.  
The child now sleeping upon the stiff hay in the manger  
will soon conquer death on that first Easter Day.

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<sup>1</sup> Dina Donohu, *When Christmas Came Again, The Guideposts Christmas Treasury* (Carmel, NY: Guideposts Associates, Inc., 1972), pp. 41-44.

<sup>2</sup> *Pulpit Resource*, December 27, 1998.