

12/29/2019 VA Christmas + 1 aa
Isaiah 63:7-9 Hebrews 2:10-18 Matthew 2:13-23

I hope that you all had a merry Christmas, that our Lord is being born anew in your hearts, and that his love is strengthening the love that you share with your family and friends.

Christmas comes with so many wonderful sentiments. Baby Jesus evokes all the tender feelings that we have when we see newborn infants. Christmas brings such wonderful promises, promises of peace on earth, good will, and joy.

Yet, even with all of the celebration of Christmas, there is a bittersweet side as well. For some, there are memories of happy times that are no more. For some, the high expectations of Christmas hopes turn into the great disappointments of Christmas facts.

So many harsh realities just don't change at Christmas. While many of us rejoice with family or friends, many others are still alone, alienated, or afraid. While many of us exchange expensive gifts, many others still lack enough to eat and to stay warm. While many of us live in relative security, many others still live in a state of violence or war.

According to today's Gospel, that first Christmas made some of these harsh realities even worse. Once king Herod heard that a Messiah was being born in his territory, he tried to kill the child.

So after the shepherds, the wise men, and the angel choir left, Joseph, Mary, and Jesus ran for their lives. So much for peace on earth and good will to men. What a way for God the Son to start a life on earth.

Simply stated, Herod went to war against Jesus. He wanted to make absolutely sure that Jesus never would become King. So Herod acted like the terrorist that he really was. He ordered his soldiers to kill every baby boy that they could find around Bethlehem. So the joy of that first Christmas was followed by a grief that was unspeakable.

Heaven came to Bethlehem at Christmas, and hell came close behind. For the satanic forces of evil knew what that first Christmas was really all about. God was acting decisively to redeem humanity from the reign of sin and death. God was getting more personally involved than ever before in order to save humanity.

The forces of evil were fighting back in a cruel way. That's just how evil is. The terrible killing of all those children foreshadowed what Jesus himself would endure on the cross. As an infant, he escaped from involuntary assassination. As an adult, Jesus chose to sacrifice his life for the sake of the world.

Jesus loved God the Father above all others. Jesus shared divine love and divine forgiveness with the unlovable and the unforgivable. Jesus shared our death so that we might share in his eternal life.

As we hear in today's second lesson, "Through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death."

This reminds us that the biggest reason that we celebrate Christmas is because we also celebrate Easter. Christmas escalated God's spiritual warfare for the destiny of humanity, and that warfare is still going on.

Easter assured God's final victory, yet to be completed. The God who was born as a baby and who died as a criminal, this God would triumph over all of the powers of evil and death. This God would forgive us of all of our sins. This God shall come again to bring a new heaven and a new earth where death shall be no more and where righteousness shall have a home.

So what's the point of all this for us today? I have a few thoughts.

First, when God acts to make things right, trouble may follow. Not always, but often. Trouble may follow us. It may follow those around us. For when God acts, evil reacts.

Second, when we try to do the right thing, that may mean trouble for us and maybe for the people around us. Not always, but often. Sometimes it's because of what we've got wrong about doing right. Sometimes it's because of what we've got right about doing right.

When troubles come to us, it may seem as though Jesus has deserted us and escaped to Egypt. It may seem as though we're all alone and undefended, like those babies whom Herod murdered.

But the crucified and risen Christ is really with us even in our troubles, even if he is hidden. He is with us through Word and Sacrament, to make present the power of his death, his resurrection, and his promise to come again. He is with us through prayer and through our fellowship with brothers and sisters in the faith. He is with us so that we may see beyond the tragedies of our present time to the glory yet to come.

Because our Lord is present in our troubles, we can be present to others in their troubles. We can offer simple human decency and kindness. Even more, Jesus Christ can use our acts of love as channels for his love. So that our Lord is present with them through us.

Christmas is such a bittersweet holy season. There is so much that we celebrate about what we've been given. There is much as yet unfinished. Christmas celebrates just the beginning.

The best is yet to come. The babe of Bethlehem, who grew up to be crucified and resurrected, invites us to join him on the journey, to follow him through how we live the moments of our lives.

Amen.

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