



First Sunday of Christmas
1 January 2023

Ascension Lutheran Church
Rev. Christian W. Marien

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, the newborn king.
Amen.

I have enjoyed the last week. One day of work. Many hours in pjs. Book reading by the fire. Kids sleeping in until 11am. One ICU visit. Coffee drinking until a second pot needs to be brewed. Being unable to answer the questions of my children as to what day it is or what time it is? Finding out that the week before Christmas and New Year's Day is called Romjul in Norway. Which means you take time to rest, read, reflect, ponder, take walks in the crisp winter air, and stay in your pjs longer than normal. My wife's Norwegian heritage is really paying off this year...lefse and romjul. It is like a dream come true. But not all of us are so lucky.

Poor Joseph. Another dream, another sleepless night, for the obedient if not nervous servant. Joseph must have begun to dread the nighttime. Those last moments between wake and sleep when the Lord seemed to favor speaking. Just a short time ago God sent an angel to let Joseph know everything was going to be fine with his new wife. And not to worry about the whole pregnancy thing because it was from God. And what would Joseph think in the morning. Too much wine the night before? Yet Joseph would be obedient to his dreams and the will of God in all these matters. Joseph would continue to Bethlehem without even a whimper as to the delicate state of his wife and his lack of say in the whole event.

Who gives Joseph a thought once Christmas is over? Writes one author. The poor carpenter who dreams dreams; he's so easy to sideline. He barely speaks in the Gospels, his important moments occur when he is asleep, and he fades from sight soon after Jesus' infancy. Yet it is the humble carpenter's willingness to abandon notions of holiness and embrace the scandalous that allows the miracle of Christ's arrival to unfold. In choosing Joseph to be Jesus' father, God leads a righteous man with an impeccable reputation straight into doubt, shame, scandal, and controversy. God's call requires Joseph to reorder everything he thinks he knows about fairness, justice, goodness, and purity. It requires Joseph to embrace a mess he has not created, to love a woman whose story he does not understand, to protect a baby he did not father, to accept an heir who is not his son. In other words, God's messy plan of salvation requires Joseph – a quiet, cautious, status quo kind of guy – to choose precisely what he fears and dreads the most. The fraught, the complicated, the suspicious, and the inexplicable. SO much for the well-ordered life.

And so Joseph and Mary and the baby Jesus head out of town. As Bethlehem disappears farther into the distance, Joseph and Mary could not believe the tragedy that was about to take place. Could anyone? Every child under two around Bethlehem hunted and murdered for their age. We remember back to Moses and his birth in Egypt. How he was hidden and floated down a river to escape the fate of all the other Hebrew children at that time. Moses fled from his pursuers only to end up in the arms of pharaoh as a son and not a prisoner under a death sentence. The similarities are striking. The baby Moses saved and proclaimed by God to deliver God's people out of the hands of the oppression of Egypt and Jesus, Son of God, delivered out of Herod's hands and into safety in Egypt that he too might live to fulfill the prophecy and the promise for God's people once again. God delivers! The stories are similar in action if not in outcome. Moses delivers a people out of slavery. Jesus delivers a people out of sin and death. Jesus is God's final word on God's people needing to be delivered. Jesus...is God's final and great light in the darkness.

I wonder what was going through Joseph's mind as he fled. Would every stranger warn Joseph of danger. Or would he step away from his fear and trust in the one who was calling his family out of Egypt. I went back to the Old Testament – to be reminded of God's promises. As the New Year has begun, it is sometimes good to start at the beginning. Hear God's promise as Joseph would have known God's promise...

Genesis 28:15

I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go,

Exodus 33:14

My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.



First Sunday of Christmas
1 January 2023

Ascension Lutheran Church
Rev. Christian W. Marien

Numbers 6:24 The Lord bless you and keep you;

Psalm 91:11 For he shall give his angels charge over you, to keep you in all your ways.

Isaiah 43:1 Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.

The innocents of a new time and place. It is an old story. The names change but death still finds us. "A voice was heard in the United States, wailing and loud lamentation, a nation weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more." "A voice was heard in Ukraine, wailing and loud lamentation, a nation weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more." "A voice was heard in Israel and in Palestine, in Africa and in Asia. A voice was heard in the world, wailing and loud lamentation, a world weeping for her children...A voice was heard in Heaven, our God weeping for God's children. No the story is not new to the world, but the story of God's salvation is new hope to those who walk with only hope as their guide. The promise that God will make a way.

In the time of Jesus, the people cried out to God for a Messiah, a chosen one, one who would come to save God's people from their sins. And in our day, the people cry out to God for a Messiah, one who has come to save us from our sins. One who has died on the cross and risen from the grave to share with us the promise of eternal life.

Moses did as God commanded--delivering the Hebrew people out of their bondage in Egypt and into the promised land. Jesus did as God commanded as well. However, this time the delivery of God's people was of a far more lasting kind--full of grace and forgiveness and mercy and for Jesus, God's only Son, a much higher price to pay. This time the price to deliver God's people would be death. But God's people had tasted death before. Jesus would see death in the faces of Mary and Martha at the death of their brother Lazarus. Jesus would see death many times over during his life and especially in the years of ministry before Jesus himself would meet death face to face. Today we hold on to God's promise. This day we remember and honor the innocents who died while Herod searched for the baby Jesus. Author Joy Wallis writes these words, "We Christians like to talk about putting Christ back into Christmas, but let's not forget to put Herod back into Christmas. Herod ...reminds us that Jesus didn't enter a world of sparkly Christmas cards or a world of warm spiritual sentiment. Jesus enters a world of real pain, of serious dysfunction, a world of brokenness and political oppression. Jesus was born an outcast, a homeless person, a refugee, and finally he becomes a victim to the powers that be. Jesus is the perfect savior for outcasts, refugees, and nobodies. That's how the church is described in scripture time and time again - not as the best and the brightest - but those who in their weakness become a sign for the world of the wisdom and power of God."

Yes, People of God, we have tasted death and we see death and live through death, and we may find that the taste is not so bitter, the vision not so blinding, the living not so incapacitating when we know that Jesus has already won the victory over death and the grave. It makes death no sweeter. Our deliverance from sin and death by Jesus makes death no less painful, no less destructive in our lives—but it does give us hope. And if we have hope—as long as we hold on to Jesus—death will never have the last word. The power of death will always lose to the power of God. Even when we turn our faces from God. When we try to move into the dark places and leave our hearts turn cold...God will still be there waiting and wanting to begin a new creation in each one of us again and again. This is the promise of a God who delivers his people again and again. This is the truth of a God who would love us enough to send his only Son into the world that we might have eternal life. This is the way that we might know who God is and what God is doing for us--this baby king who will run to Egypt to escape death only to face it many years later for all of us. This is the promise—the way, the truth, and the life. This is Jesus Christ come into the world. Thanks be to God! Amen.