

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd Ronald Royce Miller

28 December 2014

Scripture readings: Isaiah 61:10 - 62:3 Psalm 147 Galatians 3:23-25 and 4:4-7 John 1:1-18

Part of the problem with the lectionary and the lessons and all the rest of it is the three days after Christmas are fixed celebrations of - on the 26th the day of St. Stephen, the first Christian martyr, the 27th the day of St. John and then today which is the 28th is the day when the Church remembers the Holy Innocents, martyrs, all the babies, the first born male babies who were slaughtered in Herod's insane rage to get at the baby Jesus which caused the flight into Egypt of Mary and Joseph to take Jesus to escape that fate.

It's a puzzling thing, isn't it, that these three commemorations should come immediately after the nativity as celebrated on the 25th of December, and it's not a bad idea to ask why. Is there any reason or purpose in that? The best explanation I remember is that in these three days we are invited to think about the lives of people who believed in Jesus and in the first instance, in the instance of St. Stephen, we have one who believed in Jesus and because of his belief became a martyr. What he believed about who Jesus was cost him his life.

In St. John, the Apostle and the Evangelist, there is no indication that he was martyred. He probably died a natural death. But the people who have thought about this said, "*Yes, but if he had been asked to be martyred he would have given his life. Therefore he was a martyr in will but not in deed.*" Well, that's peculiar, isn't it? Until we get to today, the 28th, and in the calendars of the Church when commemorations like this fall on a Sunday they're transferred so really the commemoration of Holy Innocents to Martyrs is tomorrow. You think we have a few people in church today. Anybody coming back tomorrow? So it's worth pausing a moment to think about this. The Holy Innocents were two years old or younger so they were martyrs certainly not in will, but they were absolutely martyrs in deed.

So here is the message of Christmas, the incarnation. We get ourselves all soaped up about rockabye baby Jesus, this sweet pretty little baby in the manger and shepherds and all that. Oh, this is just lovely. We're going to have ourselves a birthday party for God, and the next thing we celebrate all the people who got killed because of it, not forgetting that we would never remember the birth of Jesus if it weren't for his execution. So we don't get very far into our recollections of who the Savior is without realizing what the cost is to him and to those who believed, who would share a message of Divine Love for the world.

I myself have said that I think we have reason to be afraid for the life of the pope who in this very day and age is saying things to powerful people, not least of which his own Curia, which I think are firmly based in the Gospel and treacherous in terms of the response they may bring. The Gospel is radical. The Gospel might cost us something. But we believe, teach and confess that without the Gospel we are, in fact, dead. Let me just ask the question: If more people in the church in Germany during and before the Second World War had preached, professed and stuck to the Gospel might the trajectory of history been a little bit different in that time and in ours?

And in terms of the Gospel - I'm reading a fascinating book at the moment which is about the translation into English of the King James Bible. There was a very popular and widely distributed English language Bible before the King James Version came out which was called the Geneva Bible, and there were a couple others before that. The Geneva Bible was called the Geneva Bible because guess where it was printed? The Geneva Bible was printed with annotations and explanations of the text and when King James became King James in England from Scotland he was very much interested in retaining and continuing this wonderful idea of the

Divine Right of Kings to rule. One word from the Geneva Bible was changed in the King James translation. This is very simplistic. In the Geneva Bible the king was often called *tyrant*. In the King James Version the king is *the king*, not a tyrant. Get it?

And so it happened just recently. I watched a re-run of the *Urbi et Orbi* Blessing of the pope which is his Christmas blessing to the city and to the world. And with my best Italian I was pretty sure I heard him say something about children in distress, abused children who are right under our eyes. And don't you know the translator said something about the troubled children right under our eyes but you know what the translator *didn't* say? He didn't translate what I am sure I heard the pope say - something about our complicit silence. So you see how translations work and you see how communicating the Gospel can become the whole business - and it fills churches on the 25th and 24th - of this rockabye sweet little Jesus we have in our arms and we control our religion as if it were a child and we forget that this child comes to shut down hell and to do it with his life by proclaiming God's love for all people, and that's not a particularly popular message and when the message becomes popular it's not a particularly safe one in this world.

So here we have the Church at Christmas receiving this extraordinary message which is a radical, deeply cutting message to the Curia and to the cardinals archbishop, to *us*. It's easy for us to say, "*Yeah, Frank did it right when he got at those guys.*" He *did*, but the message gets at us too! We are by nature sinful and unclean and we need to hear this Gospel and it does condemn us. Well, not the Gospel. We read in the lessons today about the difference between the Law and the Gospel. The Law condemns us. We know what's right and wrong and if we lived by the Law we would die by the Law because we are who we are. But the good news in the person of Jesus is the affirmation of God's love for us which - now get this - is greater than life and death itself. And if you proclaim the Gospel and it is costly to us, our faith is that God is larger than any cost that that may incur to us. And our confession is that without the truth of that Gospel we are in fact truly and eternally dead. And so the sweet little baby Jesus stuff which we've just sort of plowed through leads us to a vigor and a courage and a reality about a God we believe who will, for reasons we do not understand, enter this world and be known in this world one way only and that is in and through human flesh through the embodiment of Divine Love as it is shared among us and by us with others.

The emphasis in the Church this week would quite naturally be on the Holy Family. Consequently I brought this Egyptian icon of the Flight into Egypt. As you know, icons are sort of standardized depictions of usually biblical events or saints. And in Egyptian iconography the heads of the people seem larger than average, and that's a way of saying these were holy people. Well, the pope said something fascinating about the Holy Family. He said it was a holy family because God was in the middle of it. Guess what? Ours and yours can be holy families *too*, however they are composed, if God is in the middle of them. Nobody told Lola where she could find God. She found it when she fell in love with Al. And don't we all do the same thing - to some degree or another in our positive and mutually beneficial relationships see, in fact, in part the love of God there.

Well, it wasn't unnoticed in Rome and it won't be unnoticed here today that a part of our celebrations after Christmas are to remember that the Holy Family was in fact an immigrant

family. They fled a place where life would have been dangerous and non-productive and went without visas, without passports, without permission - to safety.

The other thing I like about this icon is the jackass is smiling. His burden is light. There is also another tradition - they have palm trees in the back. There's another tradition that when the Holy Family went into Egypt the palm trees bowed as they went by - and of course provided food. You may remember in olden days, I mean in our youth, that the Gospel lesson appointed for the first Sunday in Advent was the Entry into Jerusalem, and it seems to me that there are more than a few parallels as we remember this week the Flight into Egypt. The Triumphal Entry of Jesus into Jerusalem on a humble beast of burden as God enters the world in the Flight into Egypt to give life so that the lifeless might live. Jesus does the same when he goes into Jerusalem on a jackass and the palm trees bow before him as the branches are strewn in his way.

And so could it be that one of the dangerous messages for us in our country as we build walls between us and Mexico that those who are here even illegally might be holy families and might bring to us a message of hope and toleration and joy in sharing that which is more than plentiful here with others who have little or none. Could it be that in our theologies of the incarnation when we say we truly believe that God is to be seen in our relationships with others that that means *all* the others, even the illegals, the aliens, the undocumented immigrants, the foreigners. Could it be that the message of the Gospel is that radical and that immediate and that pertinent to us in our day and in our country, even here and now? Can you imagine sending a parent back to a country whose child has been born here and dividing that family for all the right legal reasons and many of the wrong spiritual reasons?

I had the privilege of studying with a man whose name was Hagen August Karl Staack, professor at Muhlenberg College in Allentown when I was there. He has since died. He was a participant in what was called the Confessing Church in Germany during the Second World War. He talked about how Nazi storm-troopers, and I'm sure they did this on the strength of religious conviction, would go into synagogues and remove the holiest thing there which was the word of God in terms of the scrolls and the Torah and unroll them in the streets and defecate on them and then pretend to worship this Jewish baby and his Jewish mother and his Jewish father. Sometimes we get it wrong and call it religious. Sometimes we get it wrong and call it the Law. Sometimes we get it wrong and call it the Gospel.

If Christmas can mean anything to us at all this year, could it mean that we honestly pray every day the words of that carol which say "*Be born in us today*" and that means every day. And if that is the case, my guess is we will wake up every day to extraordinary surprises, opportunities and challenges which may not be as safe as they are risky but they might be a little bit more loving than they are safe.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.