

Sermon Notes for 1/1/17 (Name of Jesus, Christmas 1)

Preached at Jehovah Lutheran – St. Paul, MN

Text: Matthew 2:13-23

Theme: CHILDREN DIE FOR THE CHILD WHO DIES FOR ALL

The Point: Rather than asking “why” when it comes to evil in this world, disciples of Jesus can focus on His saving work of undoing evil once and for all.

Introduction: Maybe our three-year-old grandson Daniel would have been spared the death penalty if he had been in Bethlehem on that horrendous night of brutality and terror. After all, Daniel is pretty tall for his age. But then the soldiers would have wanted to be sure they were covering their bases as they thrust their spears through the chests of one after another of those little Bethlehem boys. “Two years old and younger,” Herod had said – and they would not want any Bethlehem residents even close to that age left to tell the stories. I doubt that they asked for birth certificates – who knows how many children over two would also have died? So maybe Daniel would have been among the victims, had he been in Bethlehem that day.

And what would we have said to those parents and grandparents and neighbors and others who were bereaved on that day? Would we try to comfort them with the assurance that God knows what He is doing by sparing Jesus and letting all those others die? I don’t know that such a word would bring comfort at such a time of grief. Maybe we would have just held them and cried with them and not said a word. That may have been more help. Grief and sorrow have no perfect solution arising from this sin-scarred world.

If we insist on asking that question “why”, we will be sadly disappointed. The “why” question usually grows out of anger. “Why does God allow such suffering?” “Why didn’t God step in to prevent the Holocaust (or the genocides in Rwanda or Bosnia or Darfur or Syria or whatever other tragedy you might want to substitute)?” “Why does God allow innocent children to die?” “Why doesn’t God protect the defenseless?” “Where is God when such things happen?”

You can see that such questions grow out of anger toward a God who doesn’t act as I think He should. One of the greatest pitfalls of our human condition is that we believe we know better than God just what He should do in a given situation. When we judge God, the implication is that we would do better and be better in the role of God than God Himself. What would it take for God to prevent a certain tragic event? Would He need to eliminate the birth of some person (say, an Adolf Hitler) – or of that person’s parents or grandparents? What other things would He need to manipulate to make sure one tragedy was prevented? What books couldn’t have been published? What domestic abuse would have to be stopped? What educational system would need to be scrapped? On and on and on. And doesn’t it go back all the way to God needing to prevent Adam and Eve from their initial disobedience? And would that mean creating human beings who were robotic in their obedience, which would be mechanical and not true obedience?

If you would like me to provide a solution for why some suffer and die while others (even others with less faith and less of a relationship with God) seem to prosper and do well in life, you will be disappointed in this message. I do not have that answer – nor do I believe that any other pastor, priest, philosopher, professor, or wise man does.

The only final solution we know for sin and grief and sorrow and even death is wrapped up in the life of that little son from Bethlehem, who is quickly wrapped up for travel and bundled into His mother’s arms as she and Joseph, following the angel’s command, begin their unplanned journey to Egypt in the middle of the night, just ahead of Herod’s troops. How would you like to start a 200- to 250-mile journey (a walking journey, no less!) in the middle of the night without any prior warning or opportunity to pack or

even to plan?

Joseph and Mary were spared the horror of seeing their only son die that day, but they hardly had an easy or pleasant road ahead of them. They would have to travel from place to unknown place, wondering where they would encounter the next group of hoodlums, wondering where they would find lodging and supplies for the road and baby needs. They would not have predictable sources of food and water. They would not know the local customs and would be dependent on the compassion of strangers for many of their basic needs as they made their way. No easy road, indeed! Even those spared a single horror may still lead a life of poverty and trial and trouble and woe and suffering.

Every one of us, from the day of our conception, is on a journey, on a path leading toward death. None of us knows just how long that journey may be. For many, adulthood is an unfulfilled dream. For many more in our time, even birth is an unfulfilled dream. Death haunts our steps from the time that sperm and egg are joined together in the womb. That is not the way God planned it from the beginning, but it is our present reality. Ever since Adam and Eve fell into rebellion against their Maker, sin and death have been stalking our steps on this planet.

Therefore, the solution to our predicament had to deal with that reality. The author of Hebrews puts it this way in today's Epistle: "Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that 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."

Jesus came to share our flesh and blood – including our movement toward inevitable death. He knew the price of adopting our flesh and blood, and still He accepted that mission willingly for our sake. He placed His life into the hands of a teenage virgin and her would-be husband. He agreed from all eternity to serve as the Father's sacrifice that would purchase our lives. The only way death and Satan were going to be undone was if a willing, innocent victim endured death, even a tragic, violent, bloody kind of death. And through Jesus' endurance of the death of the cross, He has destroyed the one who had the power of death.

As Isaiah drew near the end of his writing and his prophesying, he faced the problem of evil and suffering. His solution was to turn the eyes and hearts of Israel to their God. Here are his poignant words: "He became their savior in all their distress. It was no messenger or angel but his presence that saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them."

No substitute was satisfactory. No prophet or angel could win our lives back from destruction. Salvation for Israel – and for you and me – takes the very Presence of the Most High. That is what Jesus has come to be, the very Presence of God among sinful mankind. He is the very embodiment of all of the Father's love and mercy.

Today on the church calendar is called the Name of Jesus (not New Year's Day), because it is the eighth day of Christmas, commemorating the day that Mary and Joseph would have taken Jesus to the temple to be circumcised and to receive His name officially. His name is Jesus, simply expressing "God saves." No substitute was sufficient. It took God to do this work. God alone could work our salvation. No animal sacrifice was sufficient to win our redemption. It took God Himself in human flesh. And we know Him by other names as well: "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." And Immanuel – "God with us." The presence of God has become real right here on earth!

And already from the eighth day of His life, Jesus began to shed blood on our behalf. Cut by the priest in the way that all Jewish males were to be marked as part of the family of God, servants of Yahweh. But that blood would be shed in great quantity before He would breathe His last at Calvary – dripping from the

wounds imposed by the crown of thorns, splashing from the heartless thrashing by the whips, spurting from the hands and feet pierced by nails, flowing down the splintered wood of a Roman cross, soaking the ground beneath, ground that had swallowed the blood of righteous Abel and ultimately that of the fully righteous Son of God. And “by his wounds we are healed,” for His blood makes satisfaction for your sins and mine, so that the Father looks at us as truly innocent, not because we are so good in ourselves, but because Jesus is perfectly good for us. “The blood of Jesus Christ, God’s Son, cleanses us from all sin.”

Death and grief are no strangers to Christmas time. Last week held some significant deaths. Of course, the whole country (the whole world?) knows about the death of Carrie Fisher (Princess Leia of *Star Wars* fame), followed the very next day by the death of her mother, Debbie Reynolds (the unsinkable Molly Brown). Many have suggested that Debbie died of a broken heart, broken by the death of her daughter.

The world may not know or realize it, but the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod also lost two important daughters just a few days earlier. On Friday before Christmas we were saddened to hear news of the death of Jean Garton, one of the founders of Lutherans for Life and a voice for the littlest and most vulnerable among us, the unborn. Jean wrote the book *Who Broke the Baby*, was the first woman to serve on an LCMS board, and chaired the LCMS Task Force on Women and other groups. The very next day (Christmas Eve), Betty Duda was taken to glory. Betty had also been a powerful witness for women within our church body, chairing the national Lutheran Women’s Missionary League and serving on various boards for Lutheran universities and agencies (including our own Concordia St. Paul).

But while death and grief may haunt us even during the sacred holidays, those holidays specify the reason why we live in hope and confidence. Jesus, God’s Son, has been born to be our Savior. He may have been spared one of the tantrums of Herod the Great, but He would not walk away from the death sentence spoken over His head by Pontius Pilate. For that is how God ordained that you and I would know life and light and joy and peace at Christmas season and every other season of our lives. We celebrate this day and sing our Alleluia’s because Jesus has taken all our suffering and death so that we may live free from guilt, fear and shame.

Rather than asking “why” when it comes to evil in this world, disciples of Jesus can focus on His saving work of undoing evil once and for all. Some of you may have viewed recently the video reading (by Pastor John Piper) of his poem *The Innkeeper*. The poem pictures an adult Jesus meeting and speaking to Jacob, the fictional Bethlehem innkeeper, whose wife and two sons (Benjamin and Joseph) had died in the attack by Herod’s soldiers. Jesus says to Jacob, who had by then spent 30 lonely years after the deaths of his family, “I am the boy. I am the boy that Herod wanted to destroy. You gave my parents room to give me life, and then God let me live and took your wife. Ask me not why the one should live, another die. God’s ways are high, and you will know in time. But I have come to show you what the Lord prepared the night you made a place for heaven’s light. In two weeks they will crucify my flesh. But mark this, Jacob. I will rise in three days from the dead and place my foot upon the head of him who has the power of death. And I will raise with life and breath your wife and Ben and Joseph, too, and give them, Jacob, back to you – with everything the world can store. And you will reign forevermore.”

Conclusion: Piper’s poem powerfully reminds us that Jesus did not come to give us answers to all our questions. He came, instead, to be the answer to the biggest question of all: “If a man die, will he live again?” And the answer is found in Jesus’ own words, “Whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die.” We who have been claimed in Holy Baptism to be children of the heavenly Father need not fear any of Satan’s threats, even the threat of death itself. We may not have answers for the “why” questions of evil and suffering, but we do know the One who has taken our suffering and our dying to Himself that we might live in Him. And the Father who called His Son out of Egypt will one day call us from this vale of tears to live with Him in heavenly glory forever and ever. AMEN!