

Sunday, December 26, 2010
First Sunday of Christmas

Isaiah 63:7–9
Psalm 148
Hebrews 2:10–18
Matthew 2:13–23

I.N.I.

Tapping into the church's **sanctoral** cycle, we join with the *comites Christi*, the “companions of Christ” whose three days immediately follow Christmas: today December 26, remembering St. Stephen, Deacon and Martyr (remember “Good King Wenceslas looked out on the Feast of Stephen?”); tomorrow December 27, remembering St. John, Apostle and Evangelist (often associated with the disciple whom Jesus’ loved), and tomorrow December 28, The Holy Innocents, Martyrs, whose story we heard in today’s Gospel.

I was taught that the three days following Christmas gave those in churchly orders a day of their own to party: on St. Stephen’s day, Christmas party for deacons; on St. John’s day, Christmas party for priests, on Holy Innocents’ Day, for acolytes. Hurray for those who serve the church, and Merry Christmas.

But following the wisdom of lectionary reform, we are now more frequently rooting ourselves in the primary feast of the Sunday assembly and its reason for the season, meaning the season of weekly worship. Tapping into the church’s **temporal** cycle, we gather around Jesus’ death and resurrection, or a weekly Easter. As my friends in the Indonesian Church say each week, “Happy Sunday.”

We have been duly waiting for Christmas, and now it’s here. We have waited to announce that in Christ God is with us, Emmanuel. But as I said and I have been saying, the center of our gathering as companions of Christ is not the tinsel of Christmas but the depth-charge of God into human existence and woe, which gets us into today’s gospel drama of running away from tyranny, the massacre of innocent children, and the making of a home with family under less than ideal circumstances. In other words, a story of death at Christmas.

This morning we could easily concentrate on the adoring Magi who play a part in Matthew’s story of honoring the promised Messiah. There is a part for the Magi that comes at Epiphany, those wise guys. But today we hear the drumbeat of frenetic imperial power in the person of the Idumean, Herod, whom history confirms was a brutal and paranoid puppet of Rome, whom Rome called “King of the Jews.” In a Commentary on Matthew referring to Herod’s role in Matthew, one writer calls the second chapter of Matthew “The Empire Strikes Back.”

Imagine this Herod’s amplified fear when the astrologers from the East asked him about another one born and called “King of the Jews.”

Herod of Judea parallels Pharaoh of Egypt in insidiously eliminating all threats to his domination by murdering a swath of children. You may remember Moses slipping under Pharaoh’s nose

through the intervention on his mother, his sister, and Pharaoh's daughter. In the gospel an angel comes to Joseph the dreamer to get the Holy Family to move from Bethlehem to Egypt and the narrator recites the prophecy from Hosea as fulfilled.

While the Christ child is safe, children suffer. This is Christmas, and we don't want to hear about death, but still today the innocent suffer, people grieve, Christmas is a time not for rejoicing but lament.

While we rejoice at the birth of the Savior, while we rejoice at our new birth, today remembering the slaughter of the Holy Innocents, I invite you to a child's lament over death:

*O the night of weeping children!
O the night of the children branded for death!
Sleep may not enter here....
Yesterday Mother still drew
Sleep toward them like a white moon....
Now blows the wind of dying,
Blows the shift over the hair
That no one will comb again.*

--Nelly Sachs, quoted in *Christmas Sourcebook* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications)
That lament was not about Bethlehem but about Auschwitz, but could be anyplace where those Herod-types decimate the landscape. What places are there in 2010?

Dear friends, Christmas is deeper than a one-day blowout, it is really and truly the mystery of God's salvation, where the refrain of Matthew's fulfillment language blows mercy and promise through human misery and woe.

While despotic and despicable powers wreak havoc on ordinary citizens, God in Christ subverts the drumbeat of doom into a way through, a path toward relief, the overturning of the status quo.

Jesus even in infancy is on the move to make a change for good, to pave the path of righteousness and justice. God is acting through angels of all sorts so that refugees have safe passage, the travelers find safety and rest, and death does not have the final word.

Today, on Sunday, December 26, 2010 we join the journey with Jesus and announce that Christmas continues for twelve days. We sing that Jesus was born for us. We offer gifts and gift-giving that honor Christ in each other. And we join the procession of weekly Sunday worship that models our own everyday life as we lift up the lowly, advocate for the innocent, weep for the lost, and claim as beloved those who are gathered by the cross and carried from death into life.

Blessed Holy Innocents!
Happy Sunday!
Merry Christmas, all you *Comites Christi!*

I.N.I.