

January 3, 2010

SOLI DEO GLORIA
2nd Sunday after Christmas

Good Shepherd, Novi

MATTHEW 2:13-23

JESUS SAVES US FROM THE BITTERNESS OF SIN.

In the name + of Jesus.

Here we are – the 10th day of Christmas. Yes, I know, the world has long since ditched its Christmas celebrations. But the world does not really celebrate Christmas. The world celebrates the buying and opening of gifts, overeating and overindulging at holiday parties, and the extra time off of work. But Christmas – the birth of a Savior, the need for a Savior, falling on one's knees before the Savior – the world does not do it, does not think it needs it, and does not care.

The Church, however, still celebrates Christmas for a few more days. And let's be honest – we need it. We need to hear the news that God so loves the world – loves people like us, like our neighbors, like our co-workers, even like felons and terrorists. He came for sinners. That's them. That's us. He came to open heaven. He came to deliver us from death. He came to forgive sins, to remove the burden of guilt, to replace fear with hope, to replace shame with peace. The presents, the lighted trees, and sugar-coated sweets don't do that. The ball dropping in Times Square doesn't do it either. So, we need Christmas because we need this Savior. Jesus saves us from bitterness of sin.

It is still the Christmas season; and perhaps that makes our gospel more disturbing than it naturally is. It is Christmas time! And what do we find? Herod is fuming. He vents his rage on the toddlers and infants in Bethlehem. Rachel is mourning and weeping and refusing to be comforted because her children are no more. Parents in Bethlehem are struck with confusion, anger, and grief as they clutch the lifeless remains of their youngest boys. And the Lord himself is on the run. Joseph **took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt (Matthew 2:14)** to hide from the murderous plots of King Herod.

Everything is supposed to be good and right at Christmas, isn't it? All men are supposed to get along – peace on earth and all stuff, right? But no. Neither the bitterness of sin nor the wickedness of men care that this is the holiday season. Rachel still refused to be comforted. The Bethlehem families still wept and wailed. King Herod still feared and raged. And the Son of God still hid in Egypt.

It doesn't make much sense, does it? It sure didn't back then either. Mothers and fathers in Bethlehem tried to figure out what could possibly make sense out of soldiers slaying their babies. As far as we know, no one ever gave them a reason for Herod's rampage. They were left to cope with the bitterness of grief and unanswered questions. Joseph at least had an angel tell him why he fled to Egypt in the middle of the night. Not that it was easy or convenient. Not that Herod's anger made sense. But even the holy Christ-child was under attack. The consequences of sin don't often come with answers, but they do come with bitterness.

If it doesn't sound like it makes much sense, then stop looking for everything to go right in this world. Since when does everything go right in this world? Sin ruins everything. Sin destroys. Sin damns. Sin makes life bitter. And sin doesn't care how festive or joyful or peaceful you are supposed to be. People lose their jobs. People get cancer. Car accidents claim lives. Bodies become wracked with pain or riddled with

disease. Tragedies don't come with explanations, but they come. Even at Christmas. Sin makes life bitter. But Jesus came to save us from the bitterness of sin.

You will note that Jesus' birth did not produce heaven on earth. Even the Son of God had to be carried to safety from the hands of wicked men. Even Jesus wore a target. But Herod the Great would not lay a hand on the boy Jesus. Not yet. Jesus' time would come. Even after Jesus was brought back to Israel, God directed Joseph away from Herod's realm – to Galilee, to Nazareth. They would stay in the backwoods, backward, little town of Nazareth. There, Jesus would grow up in safety, in anonymity.

But Jesus' day would come. The son of Herod would live to see the death of the Son of God. This time, no innocents would die as Jesus escaped. This time, Jesus would die in place of them – pierced with nails, run through with a spear. The Innocent One would be put to death for the sins of the world. He would taste all of sin's bitterness. He would feel all of its cruelty and condemnation. He would suffer its death. He came for us; and he saves us from the bitterness of sin.

And yet, the world is not a better place. We still feel sin's cruelty. But don't blame God if you still taste the bitterness of sin. It is not God's fault. God did not order the soldiers to kill the boys in Bethlehem. God did not provoke Herod to jealousy for his throne. God does not take pleasure in the tragic death of loved ones or in the bone-chilling moments when you absorb bad news. Rachel will still mourn for her children. You will still weep and grieve when sin makes its presence felt. It is not God's sin which brings the bitterness. God has no sin. But you and I do. The world does. We are immersed in it. That is why we suffer. That is why we taste the bitterness. That is why we die. Therefore, repent of your sin. Do not blame Jesus; instead, flee to Jesus. Jesus saves us from the bitterness of sin.

We may grieve, but we do not grieve like the rest of men who have no hope. We have hope. Jesus is our hope. Though Jesus had escaped the slaughter of the innocent children in Bethlehem, he did not abandon them. God called his Son out of Egypt to come back to Israel. He came back so that he would suffer and die for them. He did not abandon them. He saved them. Though their lives in this world were brief, their eternity surely is not. While their parents grieved, they had hope. Jesus is our hope.

And it is no different for you. You will taste the bitterness. You will shed tears. But you do not lose hope. For, Jesus tasted the cup of God's wrath for you, and drank that bitter cup down to its dregs. Jesus consumed the curse for you. The Innocent One died for the guilty. Therefore, he absolves you of your guilt. He purifies you in Baptism. He presents you holy and blameless to the Father. Fear is replaced with hope. Shame is replaced with peace. Life overcomes death. Jesus saves us from the bitterness of sin.

Life may have its moments of bitterness. God grant that you will be spared the tragedy of the Bethlehem families. But even if you must endure such pain and agony, Jesus does not abandon you. He does not withdraw his hope. This is what the Lord says: **The righteous perish, and no one ponders it in his heart; devout men are taken away to be spared from evil. (Isaiah 57:1)** The innocent boys of Bethlehem were spared a lifetime of hardship and grief. They rest in the glories of heaven. Even their parents, despite their bitter grief, no longer grieve. Those who shared the hope of the resurrection have been reunited with their children in heaven. As for you, you have the same hope.

Yes, dear Christians, Jesus does indeed save us from the bitterness of sin. While your grief is real now, so is your hope. So is Jesus' salvation. Grief lasts but a moment, but

God's favor lasts for eternity. Salvation in all its sweetness does not come until we enter heaven. But it most certainly will come.

That is why we still need Christmas. That is why we still celebrate Christmas. The bitterness of sin does not take a holiday. Grief and sorrow do not go on vacation. That is why we need this Savior. Jesus doesn't make light of sin and death. Rather, he supplies hope in your grief. He provides life in the midst of death. He will deliver you from a world of bitterness to the sweetness of heaven. Jesus never abandons you. Jesus saves you.

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