

† I preach in God's name for God's people. Let my words be from God and for God's people. **Amen**

Good morning.

THE CHRISTMAS SEASON IS ABOUT the downfall of the kings and kingdoms of this earth and the rising of the one everlasting King and Kingdom of Christ our Lord.

Christmas Eve starts with Caesar's census, with his desire to assess his wealth and military might. By assessing wealth from taxation and military strength of fighting men, Caesar can answer this question: Just how far can he stretch his kingdom? And yet, as he seeks to further expand his empire, to further stretch his kingdom, this very desire is what brings about the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, the city where the Christ was prophesied to be born. His census, it turns out, is what guarantees the fall of Rome and of every earthly kingdom, and it's the very thing that brings about the Christ and the beginning of Jesus' eternal kingdom.

Christmas Day starts with the Creation story, with the fact that Jesus — the infant whom the angels announced and the shepherds worshipped — is the one through whom the world was made, the one who is Light, the one who is Life. And the coming of this Light into the world guarantees the end of darkness in this world — for light shines forth and illuminates the darkness, and the darkness can be dark no longer.

And so the birth of Jesus is the beginning of Christ ruling as King, and the beginning of his Light shining forth throughout the whole creation.

And so, to put a pin on our place in the world, we should think of it this way:

- Christ is the King and is in the midst of bringing an end to his enemies
- Christ is the Light of the World and is in the midst of bringing an end to darkness

This is one and the same mission by the Holy Trinity.

THIS MORNING WE HEARD [in Matthew's Gospel] how horrific the kings and kingdoms of this world can be, just how dark the darkness is. King Herod ordered the execution of all boys, aged two and under, in Bethlehem and in the surrounding region. He, and all Jerusalem with him, took the news of the birth of baby King — news he heard from the visit of the Magi from the East — as matter of fact. He believed this baby would be the King of the Jews. Herod was enraged at the threat of this rival, this infant, and so he ordered the death of the baby Jesus.

*'A voice is heard in Ramah,
lamentation and bitter weeping
Rachel is weeping for her children;*

What kind of king would order the execution of infants and toddlers? What kind of men would carry out that order? What kind of kingdom that approves the slaughtering of infants and toddlers could hope to endure?

Instantly we understand the need for the birth of Jesus, the need for God to destroy the kings and kingdoms of this world, to destroy death, darkness, and the evil of this world. The darkness of the murder of babies must be brought to an end; the empires and kingdoms who approve such slaughter must crumble and fall.

Jesus needed to be born to come into this world to bring an end to the darkness and evil of this world. And yet, the stomach-turning truth is that without the birth of Jesus, these male babies wouldn't have been slaughtered. These little tiny boys were slaughtered in place of Jesus, were slaughtered so that Jesus and his family could escape to Egypt. It's a horrific thought — because without the birth of Jesus, these mothers would still have their little boys. And yet, without the birth of Jesus, these very same babies — and the whole people of God — and you and me — would never have salvation.

*Rachel is weeping for her children;
she refuses to be comforted for her children,
because they are no more.”*

Rachel, a thousand and more years before, died giving birth to Benjamin. She never experienced the joy of nursing her infant son, of comforting him, of mothering him — she would never see him grow old, for her life was cut short. Then, just 580 years before, during the Babylonian exile, these Judean mothers mourned because their infants and children were taken away from them into a foreign land. These mothers grieve deeply.

But here — something sadder and more sickening is taking place — for these mothers of Bethlehem will not see their infants again not because the mothers have died, like Rachel and not because the infants have been taken into exile, but because the little infants themselves have been murdered.

What kind of king? What kind of kingdom? What kind of world allows — and approves! — the slaughter of innocents? Such a king; such a kingdom; such a world; such darkness. Such kings and kingdoms and worlds and darkness must come to an end.

“The light shines forth in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

These little boys were slaughtered in the place of baby Jesus. Accordingly, they are known as the *Holy Innocents*, the ones who took the place of Christ. These little boys gave their lives for him. And because of these little ones, our Lord Jesus was kept safe, escaped to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod the King. Because of these little ones, our Lord Jesus grew beyond the age of an infant and toddler, becoming a boy, a teenager, and a man. And there, as a man, our Lord Jesus gave his life — was slaughtered — for you and for me — and for these little boys.

When we recite the Apostles Creed, we confess that Jesus descended into hell. And one of the things that we mean by this is that Jesus went to the place of the dead — to Sheol — the place where the souls of the dead were imprisoned, waiting to be freed. Among these souls were, of course, Abraham and the patriarchs, David, Jeremiah and the prophets. But, there were many others, too. There were the children of Job, who were killed when Satan tested Job. And there were these little boys, who had given their life for Jesus.

Rachel's weeping, her grief, is not the end of the story for the mourning mothers.

*16 Thus says the Lord:
“Keep your voice from weeping,
and your eyes from tears,
for there is a reward for your work,
declares the Lord,
and they shall come back from the land of the enemy.
17 There is hope for your future,
declares the Lord,
and your children shall come back to their own country.”*

Even though their grief is shattering, even though their mourning seems unquenchable, this grief is not the end for these mothers; grief and death is not the final word.

“Their children will come back to their own country.”

Jesus descends to the place of the dead, finds these baby boys, and gives them life, and these mothers will see their little boys again.

It is these who follow the Lamb wherever he goes. These have been redeemed from mankind as firstfruits for God and the Lamb, 5 and in their mouth no lie was found, for they are blameless.

There is a tradition of understanding that these *Holy Innocents* are among those who follow Jesus wherever he goes in heaven. That these little ones are among the first whom God brings into everlasting life. It's these little ones who are the first martyrs for Jesus. And so, they are granted the great privilege and joy of being with Jesus eternally.

What kind of king? What kind of kingdom? What kind of empire? What kind of world allows — and approves of — the murder of innocents, the murder of babies and toddlers?

Bethlehem should have been a safe haven for the baby Jesus and for those innocent boys. But it wasn't. Every place on earth should be a haven for babies, for infants, for toddlers, for children, for families — but that was not the world of Bethlehem, and that is not the world of today. The world seems to hate babies, children, families, life.

This world is opposed to life. Matthew is good and right to include this horrific story of the slaughter of the innocents. We see the influence of Satan in this passage and in this world. We see that he wanted to destroy the Christ; we know that he wants to destroy all that is God's. We see how twisted, dark, evil this world is.

We see the obvious need for the Savior. We see the pressing need for the light and life of Christ to enter every human heart and to flood this weary world. We see the pressing need for the kings and kingdoms and empires of this world to fall, and for Christ to return in glory to bring an end to all that is wrong, to end all that brings about mourning and suffering and grief and evil.

But also this — whatever dark and evil things that have taken place in this world, cannot help but to be unraveled, undone in the life to come.

Those little infants are with our Lord Jesus right now, and can be no better place for them — or for you and me. Rachel *will be* comforted. Those who mourn and grieve and weep *will be* comforted. Those who have endured great evil *will be* comforted.

This is the truth of Christmas — the little infant Jesus comes in humility to crush satan and is bringing about the end of evil. Christmas is about the downfall of the kings and kingdoms of this earth and the rising of the one everlasting King and Kingdom of Christ our Lord.

May our Lord Jesus comfort all who mourn; may he bless us with faith unto life everlasting; and may he come quickly.

Christ the Lord is worthy of all worship and praise and glory and honor and majesty, now and forever. **Amen and amen.**