

Christmas 1 (December 28, 2025)
Matthew 2:13-23 (Series A)
Jesus Changes Our Direction

Our Gospel reading is a bit unusual in that it records Joseph taking Mary and Jesus to Egypt after the visit of the Magi, but that visit isn't covered until next week with Epiphany. Part of the reason for this is because today also happens to be the Day of the Holy Innocents, which is observed on December 28th each year. Since we don't have a special service for this every year the story is often passed over. I will talk about the Magi in greater detail next week.

For this day it is important for us to merely know that King Herod was mad because the Magi didn't come back to tell him where this baby, who was born to be king of Jews was living. Herod, somewhat understandably, did not want any challenge to his rule in Israel. Caesar had given him that title of King, regardless of the fact that it wasn't earned and he wasn't a Jew. Power can corrupt and he certainly was.

Herod obviously has no idea that Jesus, is no longer anywhere in Israel so acts on the information he has. The chief priests and scribes said Bethlehem was the place and so to "assure" success he orders all boys up to two years of age to be killed. This actions was foretold by the prophet Jeremiah when he said, "A sound is heard in Ramah, weeping and much mourning, Rachel lamenting her children; and she was not willing to be comforted because they are not."

There is something significant about this text and the events surrounding it. God was not doing something evil, of which killing children would certainly be. Herod was evil and he acted out of hate, something which God doesn't do.

As I mentioned on Christmas Eve, Rachel the mother of Joseph, who was sold into slavery, was also the mother of Benjamin, whose name means "son of my sorrows" died in childbirth and grieved that she would never see him grow up or have sons of their own. Ramah was a town near to Bethlehem and Jerusalem, where perhaps Rachel died while on the way to Bethlehem. Now Bethlehem was a small town, which in being described as being small or too small among the clans of Judah, they may not have even been able to supply a full unit of soldiers which formed a clan. Anyway, being a small town perhaps only 20 or so boys were killed, lest we think this was a monumental massacre. This was a tragedy to be sure but more may be suggested by the text, especially when Jeremiah spoke it.

The tribe of Benjamin was a northern kingdom tribe, and they were soon to be taken captive by the Assyrians. These "sons of Benjamin" would be taken away, some to lose faith and others to die. This also is spoken of as part of Rachel's grieving.

While the Assyrian captivity was punishment for unfaithful people it was meant to bring them back to God and not an evil act by God. The death of these innocent "sons" in Bethlehem was not done by the hand of God, so there is no reason to think that these boys were ultimately punished. It would be right to think that by the grace of God they received eternal life, which is why they are considered "Holy Innocents." While a martyr is normally considered to be someone who was put to death because of their faithful stand and proclamation of Christ, since the time of

the early Christian church these children were put to death because of the fear of Christ himself coming to earth and challenging the authority of all who might claim a kingdom for themselves. All pagan kingdoms will fall and for that there should be great weeping.

So far, we are still looking for the good news in the Gospel reading and here it comes. Mary, Joseph and Jesus have been safe in Egypt for some time and then Herod dies. Evil has died, though he would be succeeded by his son who was worse than him. Joseph would have a dream telling him it was time to return to Israel. Along the way we hear that Archelaus, also to be known as Herod, had taken the throne and thinking that it might not be safe to go back near the family homestead around Bethlehem, perhaps, he takes the family to Nazareth.

So where is the good news? It is found in the Savior, now representing the nation of Israel, which once came out of Egypt. They promised to be faithful to God but failed time and again. It was in order to gain their repentance that forty years in the wilderness happen as well as attacks by enemy armies and even captivities took place. They were headed to the promised land but their lack of faith kept it from ever being all that they had hoped.

In Jesus coming out of Egypt we finally have the one who remained faithful and served the Lord with gladness enduring struggles, hardships and even death in order to win the final victory for us so that we might have eternal life, by virtue of faith in his saving life, death and resurrection. His coming from Egypt was foretold and indicated his divine nature and purpose to save. The weeping of Rachel will stop with Jesus saving us from death and bring back those who had lost their faith. The sons of Rachel are those who believe and with Christ there is no need for grieving in the spiritual sense. Christ comes to save and in him there is no sadness. Amen.