The Slaughter of the Holy Innocents

Sacred Reading - Matthew 2:13-23

What we just sang has to be one of the strangest of all carols. It’s so unlike other carols which repeat the sounding joy or ponder the wonders of God’s love! In this carol, there are no references to the holy family, angels, shepherds or magi. This is a song about death and mourning.

The "Coventry Carol" is an English Christmas carol dating from the 16th century, traditionally performed in Coventry, England as part of a mystery play called “The Pageant of the Shearmen and Tailors.” The play depicts the Christmas story from Matthew chapter two, and the carol itself refers to the Massacre of the Innocents when Herod ordered all male infants under the age of two in Bethlehem to be killed, and takes the form of a lullaby sung by mothers of the doomed children.

We’d like to think that Christmas is all about the birth of a healthy baby, the love, commitment and sacrifice of the baby’s parents, the angels who announced the baby’s birth, the shepherds and magi who celebrated the baby’s birth, but Christmas is also about a vile king who kills baby boys and about mothers who are weeping and wailing over the deaths of their children.

Outside of Matthew’s Gospel, there is no evidence of Herod’s savagery toward infants. And we might not want to understand the accounts in Matthew at a literal and descriptive level, but at a confessional and theological level. We might read such accounts as expressions of the early church’s faith that God was involved in the birth and preservation of the Messiah, that despite human evil God’s purpose was fulfilled. We’re reading confessional theological language, not literal descriptive language. We’re reading mystery not history.

Before we breathe a huge sigh of relief that the “Slaughter of the Innocents” might not have actually happened in history, and was instead a theological confession of faith, we must face the reality that innocent people are slaughtered literally and figuratively every single day. And we have good reason to be sick at heart and shaken to the bone over the slaughter of innocent people in our world today.

As much as I enjoyed celebrating Christmas with my family gathered around me, with the house and yard aglow with Christmas lights, and with a delicious dinner of fettuccine chicken alfredo, I was also painfully mindful of 139 migrants being bused by Texas Governor Greg Abbott in subfreezing temperatures, some of them wearing flip flops and t-shirts, to Washington D.C. on Christmas Eve, which some consider to be a politically-motivated, cruel, inhumane, dangerous, and shameful stunt, but what border-state governors rationalize as a protest against the Biden administration's failed immigration policies.

Our hearts cry out, “Who will save the holy innocents?’ “

Fortunately, messiahs appeared in Washington D.C., confronting evil head-on, overcoming evil with good. People like Amy Fischer, a volunteer with the Migrant Solidarity Mutual Aid Network, and Tatiana Laborde, the managing director of SAMU First Response, a nonprofit that has been assisting migrants since the buses began arriving in Washington last spring. These saviors were on the ground on Christmas Eve in DC caring for and protecting “the holy innocents.”

In the midst of despair, weeping and wailing, God is always calling for messiahs to be raised up who will overcome evil with good, any way they can possibly do it, in small seemingly insignificant ways and in great and heroic ways.

At those times in our lives when we were weak and vulnerable, hopefully we had messiahs, saviors, deliverers who cared for and protected us, people who were mindful of “the holy innocents.” Those experiences might have awakened in us a commitment, even a passion, to care for and protect others when they are weak and vulnerable. Might we see ourselves as the messiahs, saviors, deliverers of the “holy innocents” in our world today?

The Jesus story which included King Herod the baby-killer is, in part, built on the Moses story where Pharaoh orders all Hebrew male babies to be drowned in the River Nile. Despite the barbarism in both stories, messiahs were raised up to deliver the babies Moses and Jesus from death. Then both men, Moses and Jesus, continued in that train of great messiahs delivering people from oppressive tyrannical powers.

Another who continues in the train of great messiahs, who confronts evil head-on, overcoming evil with good, is President Volodymyr Zelensky of Ukraine. There is a very real “Slaughter of the Holy Innocents” in Ukraine. Already 7,000 dead and 10,000 seriously injured.

As you well know, Zelensky spoke before a joint meeting of Congress on the night of Dec. 21st, delivering in halting but forceful English an impassioned speech thanking the United States for its support in his nation’s war against Russia and vowed victory as he pleaded for further aid. Zelensky exclaimed:

Soon we will celebrate Christmas. Maybe candlelit…because there will be no electricity. Millions won’t have heat or running water. All, (the) …result of Russian missile and drone attacks on our energy infrastructure.

We’ll celebrate Christmas, and if there is no electricity, the light of our faith in ourselves will not be put out. If Russian missiles attack us, we’ll do our best to protect ourselves. If they attack us with Iranian drones and our people will have to go to bomb shelters on Christmas Eve, Ukrainians will still sit down at the holiday table and cheer each other up. And we don’t have to know everyone’s wish, for we know that all of us, millions of Ukrainians, wish the same: Victory. Only victory.

When I was in Bakhmut yesterday, our heroes gave me the flag of those who defend Ukraine, Europe and the world, at the cost of their lives. Front-line troops autographed this flag, and asked me to bring it to you, to the U.S. Congress, whose decisions can save millions of people. Let this flag stay with you as a symbol of our victory in this war. We stand, we fight and we will win because we are united — Ukraine, America and the entire free world.

Zelensky’s speech came as Congress was on the brink of sending Ukraine an additional $45 billion in assistance -- a relatively small way we can stand in solidarity with those who defend the holy innocents.

Whether you are the midwives Shiphrah and Puah refusing to snuff out the lives of Hebrew baby boys; or Pharaoh’s daughter who finds a baby in a basket floating among the bullrushes and raises him as her own; or Miriam, Moses’ sister, who offers to find a Hebrew wet nurse for the baby; or Moses’ own mother who nurses her son and protects him from danger, YOU are the story of Christmas! YOU confront evil head-on, and overcome evil with good!

Whether you are the magi who thwart the wicked Herod by avoiding Jerusalem on their return trip home; or Joseph, the father of Jesus, whisking his family off to Egypt to avoid the Bethlehem massacre, YOU are the story of Christmas! YOU confront evil head-on, and overcome evil with good!

Whether you are Amy Fischer, Tatiana Laborde, or the heavenly host of volunteers showing compassion to migrants, YOU are the story of Christmas! YOU confront evil head-on, and overcome evil with good!

And whether you are the front-line soldiers in Ukraine, doing something huge like defending the free world, at the cost of their own lives; or you are these same soldiers doing something small, like writing their names on a flag to be presented to the American people, YOU are the story of Christmas! YOU confront evil head-on, and overcome evil with good!

Whoever we are, no matter how small or great, we are the story of Christmas, when we confront evil head-on, and overcome evil with good! AMEN