

## A Message of Hope after 50 Years of Despair

I wrote the title “A Message of Hope after 50 Years of Despair” six months before *Roe v. Wade* was overturned by the Supreme Court. So the hope it speaks of is not based on that. Good thing. No sooner did State laws kick in to protect the unborn than we learned of Big Corporations offering to fly their employees to states that still had abortion. Then easier access to the abortion pill was made. And then various levels of government refused to enforce Pro-Life laws or decriminalized abortion. The spirit of Herod lives on, but this being Holy Innocents there is hope.

Why? Because as we see in our text, murderous politicians don't win. Government has a natural law requiring it to protect life; the more vulnerable the more protected. Their duty is to stop the supply side of abortion. The Church's duty is to stop the demand side. Both have failed egregiously. And no it's not because no one knew life began at conception. Since 1853 in America it was a published fact that life began at conception. (Olasky, “Historically Deadly Demand”, *WORLD*, 50). Doctors spoke up. Legislatures responded and passed laws against abortion, but juries often refused to convict. Then came the carnage of the Civil War. Returning battlefield surgeons overwhelmed by 600,000 dead were mostly Pro-Life and they spoke out. But a survey of Philadelphia doctors then found “‘the murder of the most innocent is now of such magnitude as to out-Herod Herod’” (Ibid.). Pastors were ‘strangely silent’ about the holocaust (Ibid., 51). More laws were enacted which were ignored or not enforced. The journalist Marvin Olasky knows the history of abortion better than most, he comes as close to despairing as I've ever heard him. He ends the article I cite here asking will governments on the supply side and the church or individuals on the demand side ever do enough to stop it?

In our text, no one stops Herod. The soldiers do as told murdering an estimated 20-30 babies under the age of two “in Bethlehem and its vicinity.” You want to see what despair looks like, tastes like? Look up Cornelis van Haarlem's 1590 painting *The Massacre of the Innocents*. You do see some women trying to stop the slaughter. They gouge out the eyes of soldiers, beat, and kick them. But muscle bound soldiers tear screaming babies from their arms and put those babies to the blade. It is a gruesome sight. Abortions in the last 50 years have been medicalized, sanitized done behind high walls, closed doors. Not so the Massacre of the Innocents in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, and the church in art dwelled on the savagery. Did they therefore despair?

So where's the hope? Read on. See how the Holy Spirit closes out the life, the history, of Herod the Great. Virtually every translation has what the NIV does: the death of Herod. But this isn't the usual word to refer to someone's dying or death. This word is used only of Herod's death. *teleutē* refers to someone's final ending, death stroke. It comes from word meaning to close out, finish. And the article with the word means his end, his dying, his finish is unique to him. The Great Herod's end is nothing but Death, judgment, a dead end.

Our text is one of hope because murderous politicians don't win *and* dead babies don't lose. Lutherans don't teach the absolute necessity of Baptism. Luther regarded the unbaptized in the NT as the uncircumcised in the OT. Girls certainly weren't able to be circumcised and we know they were still considered members of the OT Church because they ate the Passover. Luther distinguishes between the Order of the Church and what God can do. The Church can't bypass Baptism; God can even as He did in the case of David's first son by Bathsheba who the Scripture tells us died before being circumcised. David confesses that while the child can't come back to him, one day he'll go to where that boy has gone (2 Sam. 12:18-23).

So the babies in our text are called the first martyrs, Holy Innocents. Chemnitz reasoned that Christ's salvation applies to babies in gestation, birth, and life. “Thus the Son of God in assuming His own flesh, but without sin, also endured those things which commonly befall man in conception, pregnancy, and birth...so that from His very beginning, rise and, as it were root, He might first restore in Himself our depraved nature and so cleanse and sanctify our contaminated conception and birth that we might know that Christ's salvation applies even to man's fetus in conception, gestation, and birth” (*Two Natures in Christ*, 102). Had Christ meant to leave some life unredeemed He need only to have taken on flesh and blood after that point. But as Chemnitz notes Christ went to the root of life being conceived in a virgin's womb. Each time we baptize a baby our liturgy confesses the objectiveness of redemption. *Before* the child is baptized into the faith, the pastor says, “Receive the sign of the holy cross, both on the forehead and on the heart as a sign that thou has been redeemed by Christ the Crucified.”

As with many finer Biblical truths, be careful with reasoning that unbaptized, uncircumcised babies who die are better off. Yet, Is. 57:1 reasons this way: “The righteous perish, and no one takes it to heart; the devout are taken away, and no one understands that the righteous are taken away to be spared from evil.” And Ecc. 4:2-3 speaks positively about the unborn dying. “And I declared that the dead, who had already died, are happier than the living, who are still alive. But better than both is the one who has never been born, (not never conceived but born) who has not seen the evil that is done under the sun.” Luther says the Bethlehem boys' death was not a punishment for sin, but an obedience pleasing to God and a highly blessed work (*Wenzel*, 57).

Perhaps you think this cold comfort, and when a loss is new and fresh it is. And the fact that a pagan playwright like Sophocles can reason this way warns us about doing so. He has the chorus say in *Oedipus Colonus*; “Not to be born at all - that is by far the best fortune; and the second best is as soon as one is born with all speed to return thither, whence one has come.” (Lines, 1225-26). Thanks be to God we have more than what might have happened had a child lived. We have the message of hope in our text. We can say that even 50 years in we need not despair. Why? The Bible says so. We have

to return to this way of thinking and speaking. Boldly stating the reason for our belief is “the Bible says so”. We are to go back to thinking and speaking this way unapologetically. And I mean this in both senses of the word apologize.

The Bible says that murderous King Herod’s plan fulfilled the Lord’s prophesy that out of Egypt He would call His Son. Jesus went to Egypt to endure faithfully what the OT church did unfaithfully. Sin, Death, and the Devil held Him captive until He fulfilled every Law given to mankind and paid every last cent owed for broken laws. We just think we suffer to pay for our sins. Oh we suffer as a consequence of our sins and sinfulness, but we don’t pay one cent toward the bottom line. Jesus did this by living a sin-free life from womb to tomb, and then paying for all sins by suffering, crying, bleeding and dying on a disgusting cross for you, me, us.

This account doesn’t just fulfill the words of one prophet but two. We have to be clear on why Rachel refused to be comforted. The Spirit cites Jeremiah 31:15: "A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because her children are no more." But if you go on to read verse 16 the Lord tells Rachel not to weep for lost children because they will return to her! Their exile will be followed by return; her sorrow swallowed up by joy. (*Davies*, I, 869). What Rachel won’t be comforted by is saying that a death was good because it was quick, painless, at the end of long life. She won’t be comforted by telling her if her children had lived they would’ve died evilly. Nope. The only real comfort in the ugly, ugly face of Death is no death. And that’s what Death in Christ is.

This quote from Jeremiah is pregnant with meaning. Ramah is the OT place of disasters and where all Judea goes into captivity from. It was “a city of sadness par excellent” (*Ibid.*). And Rachel is a sad case. She said, “Give me children or I die.” She named the child she died giving birth to “Son of my suffering.” Wisely, Father Jacob changed it to “son of my right hand.” But things are different now that the Promised Seed Rachel longed for and tried so hard to have is here. He fulfilled Scripture. No child is unwanted, unblessed, unloved in Him, by Him. If you remain in Ramah with a long-gone Rachel (remember when Jeremiah wrote it was over a 1,000 years after her), all you can do is weep in despair. This is the fate of all of us who get stuck on despair because the unbelieving World and our own Flesh seem invincible, unstoppable. If we focus on unrighted wrongs, unpunished sins, there is nothing but grief and despair on this 50-year anniversary.

If we live in despair we’ll act in it. And that usually leads to taking the law into your own hands. You don’t have to think too long or hard to arrive at the unbiblical conclusion that abortion clinics ought to be bombed and abortionists gunned down. The more the Woke people assert their 50-year right to murder the unborn, the more we feel pushed to take the law into our own hands. Don’t get me wrong: There is place for the wrath of men. Ps. 76:10 says, “Surely the wrath of man shall praise Thee.” But James 1:20 warns, “The wrath of man works not the righteousness of God.” Rather than focus on your wrath focus on how God’s wrath was satisfied by Jesus’ innocent life and His guilty death. And remember the Holy Innocents.

There are many legends connected with the Flight to Egypt. Jesus meets the Penitent Thief on the cross first here. Trees bowed in adoration when Jesus passed. All the idols in Egypt fell face down. These were invented to cover up the shame of God Almighty in flesh and blood needing the protection of a human stepfather and having to flee a lying, murderous politician (*Wenzel*, 56). Skip the legends; embrace the defeats of Jesus and recognize they’re not. Our text teaches that nothing will deter God from fulfilling His good and gracious will not even the death of babies (*Gibbs*, 143). The sins of people and world leaders, like Herod, will not have the last word even in this world. The Baby born at Bethlehem does (*Ibid.*, 144). And that Word will always be for us. Amen

Rev. Paul R. Harris  
Trinity Lutheran Church, Austin, Texas  
Holy Innocents, Martyrs (Life Sunday, 20230122), Matthew 2:13-18