

"FLIGHT TO EGYPT"

A Sermon By

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106 East 86th Street
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December 31, 1989

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INTRODUCTION

One mother says that she is always sorry when Christmas is over because she knows that after her family has hung up their stockings on Christmas Eve, it will be another whole year before any one of them bothers to hang up anything again!

After Christmas Lucy muttered, "Rats! Phooey! Everything is hopeless! No one cares." Charlie Brown asked, "Lucy, what in the world is the matter with you?" Again she shouts, "Rats! Phooey!" The last cartoon shows her walking away only to turn and drop a casual comment to the puzzled Charlie Brown. "Of course you realize," she says, "That I'm just experiencing my regular, post-Christmas let-down".

Most of us are sad to see Christmas pass. And I do hope that this was a good Christmas for you! One of the very best. And no post-Christmas let down for

DEVELOPMENT

Here's a bit of Christmas humor for you to enjoy. Brenda Roberts of Stone Mountain, Georgia is a Sunday School teacher. Several weeks ago she was reading the Story of the Birth of Jesus to her day care children. As usual, she stopped to see if they were getting it. She asked, "What do we call the Three Wise Men". "The Three Maggots" replied one bright five year old. "And what gifts did the Magi bring the baby Jesus?" the teacher corrected. "Gold. Frankensteins. And smurfs!" replied the same five year old child.

Today's Scripture Lesson from Matthew contains no frankensteins and smurfs - unless you want to associate King Herod with Frankenstein's monster. Not a bad association for immediately following the Visit of the Magi, Joseph was warned in a dream that Herod was about to search for the Child, to destroy Him. And with this warning in mind, Joseph took Mary and the baby Jesus and fled to Egypt while Herod, in a terrible rage of fear and envy, proceeded to slay all the male children in Bethlehem. And what a horrible and violent conclusion to this beautiful, tender Christmas story - the slaughter of the innocents. But that unfortunately is the way life is and that is the kind of world that we live in.

WE DO NOT LIVE IN A WORLD OF SUGARPLUMS

We need in our secure and loving homes to be reminded from time to time that we do not live in a world of sugarplums dancing in the heads of children. We live in a violent world, a world where life can be hard and cruel.

A number of years ago the St. Petersburg Times did a rather unusual thing with their Christmas edition. The format of the paper that day was different. For this Christmas Day they had two front pages - one containing only the good news of the holiday season, and the other page containing the more serious matters of world affairs - like the rioting going on in some troubled spot of the world, and a bank robbery in Chicago and a tornado in Texas. The editors explained that they were arranging the news in this fashion out of deference to "the spirit of the season".

It was a noble sentiment. Nevertheless, the way the Bible describes the first Christmas stands in marked contrast. The Gospel writers did not tell

of the birth of Christ with two front pages. When you turn to the New Testament there's no separation of the "good news" and the "bad news". Thus, this beautiful story ends with a paranoid tyrant named Herod on the throne - a tyrant who would slaughter tiny male infants. And always across the manger falls the shadow of the cross.

Simeon saw it first. Remember that Mary and Joseph brought young Jesus to the Temple to be dedicated. And there they encountered a righteous and devout man named Simeon. The Holy Spirit had promised Simeon that he would not die before he had seen the Christ. Thus when he first beheld the child, Jesus, he took Him up in his arms and blessed God saying:

"Lord, now lettest thy servant depart in peace, according to Thy Word, for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation which Thou hast prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to Thy people, Israel."

(Luke 2: 29-32)

And then he made a strange and disturbing prophecy to Mary, "...a sword will pierce through your soul" he said. Luke does not record whether a shudder went through Mary's heart at this strange and disturbing word.

The real story of Christmas is one in which good and evil are both shown for what they are. That's the kind of world you and I live in - a cruel world where crime, poverty, drug-addiction, hunger, discrimination and a host of evils constantly threaten to do us in. It has always been so.

Remember how John spoke in his Gospel of the light that shines in the darkness and yet the darkness has not overcome it. But the darkness keeps on trying. Why? It may have something to do with the very nature of humanity.

A SINFUL HEART

Some will say that it's because humanity has a sinful heart. Nothing new here. Here's a scene written by an irritated journalist; see if you recognize it.

"Hurry as we may we are hemmed in by a surging crowd in front and a dense throng of people pressing in from the rear. One man digs his elbow into me, another a pole; one bangs my head with a plant...you can be considered foolish and thoughtless...if you go out...without your will made out".

It sounds something like the typical Christmas shopping crowd, doesn't it? The same writer later complains,

"Here you may pay a big rent for a miserable house. Everyone dresses above his means."

Sound familiar? Like some of your problems and frustrations? Actually, they're a quotation from the Roman writer, Juvenal, who lived from AD 60 to 140 - just after the time of Jesus. It could have been our time and our city. Human nature, unfortunately, is a constant. It changes very little. Humanity seems to have something of a selfish and sinful heart.

Andrew Tobias wrote a thoughtful column a few months ago in Time magazine which described his flirtations as a young man with communism. He said that the communist goal sounded so appealing, "From each according to his ability; to each according to his needs". It sounds Christian, doesn't it? No more Donald Trumps living it up in lavish yachts while the poor and the hungry live on our streets. And provide everyone with a decent standard of living regardless of how much he or she contributes to the common good.

It makes an appeal to our conscience and in theory it's great. The only problem is that it doesn't always seem to work out that way. People appear to be greedy at heart...lazy and if they don't have to work, they will not work. Not everyone, of course. But enough so that the entire economy of a nation is crippled. That's been part of the problem with the Eastern European countries. Put a person in a bureaucratic role and pretty soon he will have his wife, his son and his two nephews on the payroll.

One wonders...can it be that the basic thesis of communism has ignored the reality of the human condition? There is a spot of darkness in the corner of the human heart. That is why - even into this beautiful Christmas story - there intrudes a tyrant...a "frankenstein" who slaughters little babies. That's the kind of world we live in. There is that dark side to man's nature. But listen, for there's more to come.

FORCES OF EVIL WILL NOT WIN

I like to believe that Christmas is God's eternal sign to us that the forces of evil will not win. It will never happen. Evil may sit for a while on the throne, but not forever. That's part of our Christmas faith.

Predicting the future is always risky. Change can come so fast. Who ever could have predicted even a year ago the sweeping changes that have taken place in Eastern Europe. Life is hard to predict. Vivaldi's Magnificat of the Advent season reminds us that, "He has put down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of low degree". Reflecting on events of recent months, those prophetic words of Scripture are as timely as today's paper.

And predicting the future is always difficult. There is only one thing we can be sure of and that is that God will win in the long run. That's the "Good News" for this Sunday after Christmas and this last Sunday of the year. The Herods of our world may have their day, but the eternal victory belongs to Christ. We live in a moral universe. And that conviction keeps us moving forward from one Christmas to the next - regardless of how dark things may appear.

Remember the Greek myth of Pandora's box? In Greek mythology, Pandora was the first woman on earth. And Zeus wished to counter-act the blessing of fire, which had been stolen from the gods by Prometheus and given to man. So he had Pandora created and given to the brother of Prometheus. Since she was stunningly beautiful, the brother of Prometheus did not object. But Pandora brought with her a box - also a gift from Zeus. They were warned to never open it. However, Pandora's curiosity overcame her fear of what might lurk within that beautiful little box. She lifted the cover and immediately innumerable plagues flew from within its depths to journey all over the world - plagues that afflicted the mind, the body and the soul. In terror, Pandora tried to shut the box - but it was too late! Only one thing remained in that box - HOPE! Hope remained to comfort mankind in his misfortunes. It is that hope that we celebrate this day and this Holy Season.

Wrote John in his Gospel,

"The light shines in the darkness and
the darkness has not overcome it."

We are the recipients of that hope.

I read recently about a certain kind of fish that has four eyes. These looking creatures are native to the equatorial waters of the Western Atlantic region. The technical name for them is "anableps", meaning "those that look upward".

I may be stretching it here a bit, but this is what Christians ought to be called. "Anableps" - those who look upward. These distinct fish are called that because of their unusual eye structure. They have "two-tiered" eyes...with the upper and lower halves of each eyeball operating independently and having separate cornea and irises. The upper eyes protrude above the surface of the water and enable the anableps to search for food and to spot enemies in the air. The lower eyes remain focused in the water, functioning in the usual fishlike fashion. So, at the same time, they can live in both world - the world below and the world above.

This is a good description of the followers of the Christ Child. We see in two worlds. We see the world of the present reality where Herod so often sits upon a throne. But we also see something of the other world, that world that is yet to come - a world of hope and peace, of joy and of love...a world where the Lord of Life and Love reign forever and ever.

So do not despair. Go into this new decade with faith and hope. We live in a dark and difficult world at times, but it is our belief that He has "overcome" the world. That His star still shines as a reminder that God has not and will not forsake His own.

"I said to the man who stood at the gate
of the year,
'Give me a light that I may tread safely
into the unknown'
And he said, 'Go out into the darkness
and put your hand into the hand of
God.
That will be to you better than a light
and safer than any known way'"

PRAYER Help us to feel Your presence in these moments, O God, as we
come to the end of this service...on this the last day of this
year, the last day of this decade.

Strengthen us for the days ahead. The race is short, dear God, even at
its longest and we would run it well, always to Your glory. Amen.