

WELCOME 27th December 2020 – 1st Sunday of Christmas '20 B

Matthew 2:13-23 & Hebrews 2:14-16

Welcome! It's great to be together again. I pray you experience God's grace in abundance in worship today...maybe like never ^b/₄. Please check our website for important information & updates. No Zoom Bible Study this week...**BUT**...

As has become our custom there are Group Study & Discussion resources right there in your hands. *Special welcome to those who are with us on-line. We want to equip you so God leads you into the fullness of His word & his work in your lives & then out into the city to share what God has done for you.* Remember we still do those things we need to maintain a level of safety: Hand sanitizer. Masks. Sign in. No morning tea just yet. Offering. Communion. Thanks set-up/clean-up folks!

As we move into this week... The Headlines are a constant reminder: our world is often a dark place: "Christmas travel plans in disarray after northern beaches COVID-19 cluster" "Mum accused of stabbing son" "Shock as virus rules change midflight" "Forcibly displaced people tops 80 million globally" "Over 100 million Australians rely on welfare & income support for the first time" Are we really surprised...peace on earth? Goodwill? This is still 2020 after all...

But the Christmas narrative as Matthew tells it, is no silent night. The world did not get cleaned up & made presentable for Christ's birth. Christ is born into a world of darkness & into the real lives of real people grappling w/ fear, oppression, violence, loss of innocence, sorrow, weeping, struggle & death. But in the midst of this world – a world that seeks to disrupt, deny, displace & destroy life - we experience the truth that Christmas is more than a silent night.

Christmas is the bold declaration that while we can't guarantee outcomes, prevent disaster or protect against every evil...we know one thing: God is always good.

He is good in your lowest of lows & in your highest of highs. He is good when you're afraid to sit closer than a room away from someone else, & good when you gather together with warm hugs & deep joy. He was good in 2020. He will be good in 2021, even if our circumstances don't change...or if they get worse.

Remember, it's God who makes things new. He stands beside you. He dwells ^w/_{in} you. He heals. He restores. He resurrects. That's his plan for you for Christmas & for everyday for more than a silent night.

We'll explore & experience together that Christmas is more.

Let's pray...then we'll get stuck into it.

PRAYER OF THE DAY:

Heavenly Father the best gift of all is your presence & in the bleakness of a stable, your Love was born for us. Pure love – Undiluted Love – Indescribable Love poured out for all. Such grace undeserved requires a response in life here & now.

Forgive our ingratitude. Pardon our apathy. Draw us to you & ignite the fire of your Spirit in us. Breathe to life the life of your Son in us. Grow into fruitfulness your Kingdom in & among us. Continue your saving work in us today; we pray through Jesus Christ...Amen.

Let's sing & then we'll hear God's Word...

FAITH CHAT:

1. Best part of your Christmas so far? Anything still in the works?
2. Who or what are the "Herods" in today's world disrupting, destroying or making life a worrisome place?
Maybe not a person...circumstance?
How do we pray for that...work toward what God might be seeking there?

BIBLES

1st Sunday of Christmas '20 B – CHRISTMAS IS MORE THAN...A SILENT NIGHT

What were they thinking? Usually we associate that w/ someone doing something less than helpful? Or even ridiculous? But I'd love to meet the 1st person who said to their family, "You see that animal over there? I'm gonna get me a bucket..." Or the person who said, "You know...the next time that bird does that! I'ma eat it."

But I'd also love to be in on a major historical transition...How the followers of Jesus went from being mocked...that's an old piece of satirical graffiti mocking "Zenon worshipping his god"...Jesus is the donkey being crucified....schoolyard bullying...but how the church went from *THAT* to written collections of Scriptures & specified dates in the calendar year noting a parallel church year...I've studied history & I have an idea of when; but the inner thought processes of those faithful men & women of the 3rd 4th 5th centuries.

I'd love to know what they were thinking when not too long after Christmas was pegged on 25th Dec...beauty/high celebration/great joy/tenderness/warmth/love that accompanies the birth of Jesus...that the next 3 days were set aside to remember things ugly - hurtful - sad...hideous & heinous are better descriptions...3 days that acknowledge Stephen John & children slaughtered by Herod. As much as Dec 25th is bathed in light & joy & love & exaltation...Dec 26th 27th & 28th are awash in blood & suffering.

Stephen was the 1st martyr for the Xn faith, Acts 7, stoned to death for his witness to Jesus...literally in the face of the Jewish High Council. His devotion to Jesus cost him his life. John, apostle & evangelist lived at Jesus' side during Jesus' ministry & died in exile on the island of Patmos having written the Revelation Jesus gave him of the final realization of Christ's rule in earth & heaven. The only of Christ's original followers not to be *put* to death, John died as cost for trusting in the One who truly loved him.

Then there's today...the day we remember children...children who in their anonymity were such a threat to King Herod that he ordered their death. Sharing a common birth-season w/ Jesus cost them their lives. Just being born around the same time around the same place...& they're slaughtered. I mentioned last week today was a significant Sunday in the church year...What were they thinking? What were the church leaders who set out the church year for us... gave us that as a guide & tool for learning about the life of Christ & the lives of our faith ancestors... what led them to arrange these 3 days...immediately after Cmas? What were they thinking? What did they want us to know, learn, see?

Maybe this should come as no surprise...We know what John said just 2 days ago: *The light shines in the darkness, & the darkness can never extinguish it...*but it will give it a go...it will forever try...& some days feels pretty close to succeeding? And we can go back even farther...At the beginning the man & woman God creates haven't had enough time to even enjoy all the trees in the garden ^{b/4} they eat from the one they're not supposed to...From the beginning God & all that would lead us away from God's good intent & eternal blessing are at odds. Salvation & endless death are in conflict at once & always.

So it is here...while the magi travel enormous distance to worship...Herod sends soldiers just down the road to kill. The wise travelers offer their gifts & it seems perhaps recognize at a life-changing level the true object of all their searching – the real destiny of their longings – the final point of their lives...while Herod bathes his kingdom in blood so he can stay mounted on the throne. He's killed some of his own children & at least one of his wives to maintain his rule & protect his power...What's a few more Jewish kids for whom he feels no kinship loyalty or care.

And 3 of the gospels note that the 2nd act to Jesus' ministry...his baptism being the 1st... *He was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where he was tempted by the devil for forty days.* The tempter tries w/ all his might to get Jesus to walk away from his God-ordained path of bringing life through death. Throughout his ministry it was the demons that recognized Jesus immediately when he came to cast them out of people in their possession & they trembled in fear. God & the wholeness-restoring love of Christ confront evil, sin & death on every page of the NT. We are confronted daily by all manner of people or circumstances that bid for our devotion or strive in us to deny the truth that God is with us...displace our trust in his care & provision...disrupt our obedience & devotion to the Father...or destroy our confidence & assurance of our salvation in Christ. Herod lives strong in 2020.

It's easy to hear the voices around or w/in that tell us we're all alone, that we aren't loved, that salvation is a lie that our world is coming unstuck & the future's in **OUR HANDS**. It's easy to hear the tempting allure of committing my security my safety into something I can see or spend. It's easy to fall into the trap of believing that power, intimidation, self-preservation & win-at-any-cost is the way ahead. Sometimes those voices sound soothing & charming & glamorous...Historians say Herod's regal contemporaries viewed him as something of a saviour in his own right...his rule was stable his streets safe his economy strong...much like those who praised Hitler for punctual train service. Evil rarely presents itself as a beast w/ horns & claws. Usually it dresses

itself respectably. It flourishes in the systems we rely on to keep society in motion. Evil never acts alone. Tyranny & arrogance can't exist in a vacuum. They demand accomplices. They survive because their enablers are also contributors. The brutal realities of life often just pull the rug right out from under us.

What were they thinking? our faith ancestors who wouldn't let us walk even a day away from the birth of Christ w/o reminding us that Christ is born into a world of darkness & into the real lives of real people grappling w/ fear, oppression, violence, loss of innocence, sorrow, weeping, struggle & death. To let us know that in Jesus, Immanuel, God did indeed draw near to us, took on our life (every beautiful & horrific bit) & experienced & endured all we do - disappointment, fear, violence, suffering, sadness, even death. So that we would know we are not alone — we do not suffer alone, fear alone, live & die alone. That *“whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.”*

I think they wanted us to know there is a cost to Christmas. There is a cost to God's plan to redeem humanity. To drag us out of death into life does not come w/o a price. It costs God the world to give the world freedom to turn away from him. It costs God His only beloved Son to win us back:|

Our faith ancestors gave us this cluster of 3 festivals of martyrs immediately following the *“wonder & mystery of the word made flesh”* as a reminder that somewhere part of creation is up all night crying its eyes out. A world that suffers in its own rebellion against the God who loves it. A world that breaks its own heart as it breaks the heart of its Creator.

In any given year...on any given day...the headlines of the world will be repeated. Someone, something, somewhere will try to deny the truth that God is with us...displace our trust in his care & provision...disrupt our obedience & devotion to the Father...& destroy our confidence & assurance of our salvation in Christ. But the life of a follower of Christ in this world is not a life on the run, but a life that lives & grows in the presence of “God w/ us” who stands alongside & dwells w/in so that every day & every circumstance becomes a sign that God's goodness never fails, his love never ceases, his power in us never falters, his promises to us are never forgotten, & his purposes & plans for our eternal good always come to pass.

Christmas is the bold declaration that while we can't guarantee outcomes, prevent disaster or protect against every evil...we know one thing: God is always good.

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together with warm hugs & deep joy. He was good in 2020. He will be good in 2021, even if our circumstances don't change...or if they get worse.

Christmas begins in the birth of a child. But it doesn't end when this child grows up, announces God's rule of grace, mercy, forgiveness, peace love & joy. It doesn't end when he is crucified killed mercilessly & buried. It doesn't end when he is raised again. Actually, it doesn't end until Jesus draws all of us into that promise kept only in Him. It doesn't end until he raises us to new life even amid the very real challenges that face each of us here & now. It doesn't end until we too are part of that proclamation of mercy, forgiveness love hope & joy speaking that truth into another's life right in the face of this world's brutality.

Remember, it's God who makes things new. He stands beside you. He dwells w/in you. He heals. He restores. He resurrects. That's his plan for you

Let's pray w/ that in mind... ***Loving God, help us worship only Jesus, so that we share in the song of the angels, the gladness of the shepherds, and devotion of the wise men. Close the door of hate and open the door of love all over the world. Let kindness come with every gift, and good desires with every greeting. Deliver us from evil by the blessing which Christ brings, and prepare our hearts to be transformed by you that we may shine with the light of Christ and all around us be drawn to love Christ who is alone Lord & Saviour - Amen***