

## Sermon for the Second Sunday after Christmas Day

January 5, 2019

### The Holy Eucharist

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

*Year A: Jeremiah 31:7–14; Psalm 84:1–8\*; Ephesians 1:3–6, 15–19a; Matthew 2:13–23\**

The Magi—the Wise Men—do not arrive in Bethlehem until this evening, when we observe the Eve of the Epiphany. But for this morning, our lectionary has borrowed from our Roman Catholic friends what they call “The Feast of the Holy Family”—the story of the flight of Joseph, Mary, and the child to Egypt and their return after the death of Herod.<sup>1</sup> What is left out by our friends, and officially by us, is the heart of Matthew’s story. But we heard the omission: the three verses that tell of the killing of the young boy children in Bethlehem, a terrible story by itself, but made more terrible by the evil afflicted on Jews by Christians and others through the millennia.

I’ve quoted before the writings of Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, who was for over two decades a leader of part of the Orthodox Jewish community in the British Commonwealth. In the summer of 2018 he was moved to write, “Anti-Semitism has returned within living

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<sup>1</sup> *Prayer Book Studies 19: The Church Year: The Calendar and the Proper of the Sundays and Other Holy Days throughout the Church Year* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1970), 24–25.

memory of the Holocaust.”<sup>2</sup> It’s hard to imagine how this has happened in Western Europe, the United Kingdom, in the United States, and in the streets of our own city, New York, New York—even during this Christmas Season. It is evil.

But Matthew’s purpose was not to create or promote the evil of anti-Semitism that would come about in the centuries to come. I think Matthew told the story of the killing of young boys to set the narrative of Jesus’ life in the struggle with evil that Jesus faced. In Mark, Matthew, and Luke, the demons know immediately who Jesus is, “The Holy One of God.”<sup>3</sup>

Early in Mark, Matthew, and John, seeing Jesus heal on a sabbath day moves religious leaders to seek a way to destroy him.<sup>4</sup> Luke is the only gospel where the decision to try to kill Jesus is not made until the adult Jesus arrives in Jerusalem.<sup>5</sup> Again, Matthew places that struggle as beginning with Jesus’ birth.

I’d like to talk a little about Joseph’s dreams. There are four of them in Matthew. The first is when he is ready

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<sup>2</sup> <https://rabbisacks.org/people-dwells-alone-balak-5778/>, (accessed 4 January 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Mark 1:24; Matthew 8:29; Luke 4:34.

<sup>4</sup> Mark 3:6; Matthew 12:14; John 5:18.

<sup>5</sup> Luke 19:47.

to divorce Mary quietly, because she is with child. In a dream, he hears, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit; she will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”<sup>6</sup>

We learned of the other three dreams in today’s gospel. First, Joseph is told by an angel, “Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there till I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.”<sup>7</sup> After Herod dies, he is told, “Rise, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child’s life are dead.”<sup>8</sup> Finally, Joseph is warned in a dream not to return to their home in Bethlehem, so they went to Nazareth.<sup>9</sup>

It’s worth noting that Matthew says that Joseph took “*the* child and his mother”—and not “*his* child and his mother.” The virginal conception was an important proclamation for Matthew and Luke—for the record, it’s a subject not addressed at all by Mark, John, or Paul.

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<sup>6</sup> Matthew 1:20–21.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 2:13.

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 2:20.

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 2:22–23.

Now Rachel weeping for her children. In Jeremiah, Rachel weeps because children are sent away into exile. The Lord responds to the complaint with a prophecy to comfort and to bring the children home, “Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears . . . they shall come back from the land of the enemy. There is hope for your future, says the Lord.”<sup>10</sup> The exiles do return. Jerusalem, its temple, and its wall are rebuilt.

What remains hard is murder, especially of children. Some of you may remember from the old Prayer Book the collect for the we call the Holy Innocents: “O Almighty God . . . madest infants to glorify thee by their deaths.”<sup>11</sup> That’s an understanding of God that’s very hard for me.

But we have a new collect for this feast. It includes these words, “Receive, we pray, into the arms of your mercy all innocent victims; and by your great might frustrate the designs of evil tyrants and establish your rule of justice, love, and peace”<sup>12</sup>

Yet the problem of evil remains. God answers by being made Man, by dying, by rising, and by showing

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<sup>10</sup> Jeremiah 31:16.

<sup>11</sup> *The Book of Common Prayer* (1928), 102.

<sup>12</sup> *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979), 238.

humankind a Risen Jesus. It is not an easy answer, but it is one in which I have faith.

I'm close to two couples who live in different states. Both lost children, one during childbirth, one couple two weeks after their child was born. Both couples have two adult married children, one couple has four grandchildren, the other three—probably more to come. The heartache they carry when they think of their daughters is real whenever they think of their daughters. My friends, all four of them, are people of faith. We are an Easter people. Christmas is an Easter feast. We journey in this life to the life of the world to come.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,  
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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