

“Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, “Out of Egypt I called my son.” Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: “A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more.””

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

It doesn't seem to take too long for the world to get past the celebration of Christmas and on to the next thing. Already on Boxing Day, the day after Christmas, some of the radio stations that had been playing non-stop Christmas music throughout December returned to their regular format. Some people have taken down their trees for another year. Some of the houses that were so brightly lit have become dark again. Now people are looking forward to New Year's Eve; that night some of those lights will be on again. All we have left is to eat up the last of the leftovers, to find a place to put the new gifts and then we get on with life.

That is always the reality, isn't it? We have to get on with life. Yes, it is wonderful to have the celebration of Christ's birth. It is a blessing to be able to enjoy the time with family and friends. For many people the Christmas season is the highpoint of their year, bringing with it that special joy, excitement and what so many think of as holiday magic. But before we know it that joy and peace are gone. The magic disappears in the day to day course of life itself.

We, as God's people, should always remember that the Saviour, born for us at Christmas, continues to bring us hope, peace and joy in the midst of all life's moments. The church continues to observe Christmas until the feast of the Epiphany. We do have our twelve days of Christmas. But even greater is the blessings that are ours because God entered our world in that manger of Bethlehem. We are blessed that the Eternal Son was willing to become one with us in our humanity, to redeem all of fallen mankind from sin, death and hell. In the Child born to save us; through the Christ who came to us at Christmas; because the Lord of All has made His glory known to us, we have a hope that lasts through all our days. Isaiah said it so well in our Old Testament lesson today: *“I will recount the steadfast love of the LORD, the praises of the LORD, according to all that the LORD has granted us, and the great goodness to the house of Israel that he has granted them according to his compassion, according to the abundance of his steadfast love. For he said, “Surely they are my people, children who will not deal falsely.” And he became their Savior. In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.”* (Isaiah 63:7-9, ESV)

We need to hold the joy of Christ with us in our hearts in each and every day of our lives! We don't want the joy of the good news the angels gave to the shepherds to be over, just because we journeyed to the manger. But we can be sure of this: the devil doesn't want the blessings of Christmas to abide in our hearts. He doesn't want to find any hope in the midst of the brokenness of this sinful world. He will do everything he can to keep us from believing that the birth, the life, the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ can do anything for us.

We have a vivid testimony to that truth in our text today. The three days after Christmas reminds us of some very sad truths. First we have St. Stephen's Day. We may know it better as Boxing Day, but it is the day when we remember Stephen, the first martyr of the resurrected Christ. The following day, the 27th of December is the feast of St. John, Apostle and Evangelist. John was not martyred, but he was exiled as he himself says: *“I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.”* (Revelation 1:9, ESV) Today is known in the church as the Feast of the Holy Innocents, remembering the infant boys of Bethlehem who were murdered because of the cruelty, the jealousy and the hatred of Herod. We remember them as martyrs of the church. Their innocent deaths point out in a troubling but also undeniable way that the Saviour has indeed come, for through Herod's hatred—and in the desperate actions of the devil who controlled him—we see our hope: the hope that is ours through the One who does indeed destroy all the devil's evil and treachery.

It is true that the events of our text didn't happen right after the birth of Christ. The visit of the wise men, who come and ask at the palace of King Herod: "*Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.*" (Matthew 2:2, ESV) didn't take place on the night of Jesus' birth. We think it may have been weeks or even a couple of months before they found the Holy One in Bethlehem. It isn't about the time frame; it is about the reality of life in this sinful world. Herod is driven mad with jealousy. He isn't going to allow any usurper to his throne to live in Israel. He tries to trick the wise men into revealing the location of the Christ, but God warns them of Herod's intent. Through an angel God also warns Joseph to flee to Egypt. The nice, idyllic idea of the Christmas season is thrown into chaos. Joseph, Mary and the infant Jesus flee to Egypt. The wise men return home on a route that will avoid Jerusalem. But that doesn't prevent Herod's evil actions. Our text tells us: *he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men.* What happens to the joy that should have filled the earth at the birth of Christ? *Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: "A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more."*

This is the reality we see over and over again in this world. The joy of the life we have in Christ is displaced by the reality of life. A fire devastates a family and their home on Christmas day. Thieves break in and, like the Grinch, steal the gifts that are under the tree. Russia and Ukraine exchanged hundreds of drone strikes on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. Ukrainian officials report civilian casualties, power outages, and extensive damage as air defences work through the night. We sing hymns of peace, but that peace is often elusive.

Where is the joy of Christmas? Is it over so soon? The devil's evil desire is to bring despair and disappointment to the hearts and lives of people. His hatred is especially strong and most often directed towards those who, through faith, turn to God in praise and celebration of His gift of the Saviour. He works to convince people that even God cannot help us. He cannot save us. He cannot turn back the pain and evil of this world.

And yet, Christmas and its message of hope are not over! We may not understand all the whys and wherefores in God's purposes. God could have stopped Herod. God could have warned all those parents about Herod's evil plan. In faith we must leave some of those questions to God. But in the desperate actions that result in the slaughter of these holy innocents, we see a testimony to the very truth that the Saviour of the world has come. Herod was afraid and jealous of a potential usurper to the throne. But the devil was also at work here. In fact, the devil was more frightened by the birth of Christ than Herod was. The devil may not be all knowing as God is, but he recognized the Babe in the manger for who he was—and the devil was afraid. He hated that Child, he hated what that Child would do to him. He hated what that Child would do for us. St. John reminds us: "*The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil.*" (1 John 3:8, ESV) The Scriptures reveal how, in the years that followed, the devil was intimidated, threatened and indeed dethroned by the one that Isaiah calls "*Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*" (Isaiah 9:6, ESV) Even though the devil's actions are futile and powerless, he won't go without a fight. And so, the devil worked in the heart of Herod to destroy God's plan from the moment God's Word of promise is being fulfilled in human history.

Yes, Satan worked through Herod to foil God's plan, but they both fail. Christ has come for a greater moment, for a moment when He will have a direct confrontation with the devil. The devil will pull out all the stops, and will even think that he has won when Christ is crucified. But the devil doesn't win. Jesus Himself declares: "*I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.*" (John 10:11, ESV) On the cross, Jesus fought the ultimate battle with the devil. He bore the sins of the whole world, including our sins, as He suffers and dies for us. But that isn't the end. C. F. W. Walther expresses it well in the Easter hymn: *The foe was triumphant when on Calvary The Lord of creation was nailed to the tree. In Satan's domain did the hosts shout and jeer, For Jesus was slain, whom the evil ones fear. But short was their triumph; the Saviour arose, And death, hell, and Satan he vanquished, his foes. The conquering Lord lifts his banner on high; He lives, yes, he lives, and will nevermore die.* (LSB 480, st. 1, 2)

The living Christ is the same Lord born in that manger. He lives to keep the blessings of Christmas alive for us always! Yes, the devil continues his evil work and tries so hard to rob us of the joy and hope we have in Christ. He wants the blessings of Christmas to be over in our hearts and in our minds. Perhaps it would be better to say he wants us to doubt all that Christ does for us. But remember what Paul said in our Epistle lesson: "*But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.*" (Galatians 4:4–7, ESV)

Is Christmas over for you? The joy and blessing that come through Christ's birth never end. We heard it in the blessing given to God's people in our Christmas Day worship: May the Good News of Christmas be a blessing to you throughout the year. May we demonstrate to the world the faith God gives us. May we share with people everywhere the love, the compassion, the fatherly care of our gracious God. May we experience the hope He offers us in these troubled times. Amen.