

Sermon for Holy Innocents Day /Christmas I

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St. Joseph Parish

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It seems a shock to one's spirit to be celebrating the birth of our Saviour and a feast that remembers Herod Antipas' murder of innocent children in the same week. This is the same Herod who seeks to kill Jesus the infant. He succeeds.. in so doing to the man on the Cross. Moses is the infant hidden among the bulrushes who faced the same fate as Jesus at the hands of Pharaoh.

What was God's plan? Moses was to be saved to save God's people in the Exodus; Jesus was saved to save God's people from sin and death in the Resurrection; the Holy Innocents were saved from Herod to God's bosom at their deaths to bear witness to our eternal life with God. God's plans, His promises, will not be thwarted.

We need to appreciate what those humans favored by God to carry out his plan of salvation were up against. We need to look at Pharaoh and Herod and.. Jesus.

Joseph and the other sons of Jacob descended into Egypt to escape famine. Unlike the Pharaoh who knew Joseph the patriarch, The Pharaoh of Moses' time was cruel and vindictive. Jesus' forbears, the Hebrews of Egypt, were enslaved by Rameses II, most likely, enslaved because of their fertility... because Ramses needed hands and backs to complete his giant storage house cities in Pithom and the city he named after himself.

To enslave the Hebrew workforce was to further speed on his building projects and simultaneously to control the population growth of the Hebrews. Pharaoh's plan was this: The Hebrew women were sent to work in the fields and brickyards to keep them occupied with something other than making babies or having time to care for large families. The Hebrew men doing the onerous building would succumb to the forces of attrition- physical exhaustion, disabling work injuries, ill health and early death.

God plans would not be thwarted; so the opposite, in fact, occurred: Scripture tells us that the more the Hebrews were forced into labor, the more they multiplied. What was Pharaoh afraid of? If the Hebrews became numerous among the Egyptian populace, there

was a risk they could join forces with Egypt's enemies in a coup or military campaign and overthrow him and his court and take power. This therefore is what he said to His Egyptian subjects, "Every son that is born ye shall cast into the river, and every daughter ye shall save." (Ex. 1:22)

But God saved Moses to lead, Passover night was long in coming but arrived, the Exodus began, and Yahweh's people came to the Promised land of Canaan. God's plan of saving his peculiar people was not to be thwarted by the designs of powerful men.

What of Herod? Herod was not a Jew. He and his clan of Idumeans were descended from the occasional enemies of Israel, the Edomites. He, like Pharaoh, was a prodigious builder and a regal success in terms of wealth and power. The historian Josephus cannot always be trusted for veracity, but he tells us that, as Herod's years progressed and approached the time of our Savior's birth, his obsessive defense of the throne became a mighty ruthless grip.

Previously, he had his royal predecessors Antigonus and Hyrcanus eliminated. After disposing of them, He nearly exterminated his political rivals, the Hasmoneans, even those related to him by marriage, his brother in law, his mother in law, and even Mariamne, his favorite wife. As his life shadow lengthened and his tenure of the throne became more vulnerable, Herod killed off his own three sons.

Outside of his family, he used espionage and feigned assassination attempts to corral political suspects. Fearing lest his people would not mourn at his death, he reportedly ordered that nobles from throughout the land be executed immediately when he died to ensure nationwide mourning on that day. My main point in all this is this: In such a setting, the murder of some male infants in a small village called Bethlehem in order to eliminate a suspected dynastic rival is very much in keeping with Herod's character. A rival who was born not to an earthly king's robe, but to poor swaddling clothes... A rival who was born with a manger for a palace...

...**The** Holy Innocent.

Matthew is at pains for us to see Jesus our Lord as the new Moses in his gospel. So now Matthew has the holy family flee into exile from the Pharaoh-like Herod and return

to the place of slavery, Egypt, so that he can say, “Out of Egypt have I called my son.” As the new Moses, Jesus will free the Jewish people from bondage to laws and customs that enslave their spirits, that distort the understanding of God’s own Spirit, and that cannot save them from sin and death. In the Holy Spirit as he writes, Matthew plants in our hearts TODAY the dynamic of Exodus and Exile, so as to appreciate all the wonders of all that Jesus does, especially in freeing us from sin and death.

As the new Moses, Jesus leads us.. if we will follow Him as if our lives depended upon it... they do!

And a life beyond this earthly life **does** depend upon it. For now, He offers **exodus** from all things to which we are bound, things which cause us to go astray from our Shepherd: especially ourselves, especially our pursuits become idols, plans and prejudices ..an exodus from all things which keep us in **exile** from the true life He offers us, and thus from returning home to our God.

Slavery and Exodus..Exile and Return.....Sin and Reconciliation...Death and Eternal Life. Can you see the pattern? Ours is a God driven to save those He loves. This is God’s basic plan of salvation. He clearly and constantly brings salvation about- even in the minutest details of daily life.. And he does all this on His own for the sake of the people he created, molded, sustains, and loves..and that includes us. God’s plans cannot be thwarted.