

SECOND SUNDAY OF CHRISTMAS, YEAR B, JANUARY 3, 2021

This is always a challenging Sunday to preach because in most people's minds Christmas is now over for another year. And this Christmas was like none that we had ever experienced before so many of us feel that it's time to move on.

But today is the second Sunday of Christmas and today's readings are an important part of the Christmas story, even if they spoil the warm glow of mangers, shepherds and wise men that is in our minds.

Coming after the Christmas celebrations the Gospel reading today is known as the slaughter of the innocents under King Herod and the fleeing of the Holy Family to Egypt. It is not a joyful story. It is a story about a privileged, paranoid, vindictive man who would do anything to hang onto power. This is a man who eliminated any threat to his throne including killing three of his sons and a wife. He was prepared to protect his privileged position with brutal force without a shred of guilt over the unbearable suffering caused to the loved ones of the children he murdered. This was his definition of security and one which has been repeated throughout the ages.

The story also tells us that an angel came to Joseph in a dream and tells him to take his family and flee to Egypt. He stays there until he hears that Herod has died and finally returns to his home in Nazareth. This story perfectly illustrates what we know life to be like. Isn't it true that the older we get we recognize that great joy and great suffering exist right beside each other. We know that even as some celebrate, others grieve and sometimes we find ourselves doing both simultaneously.

The Gospel reveals to us the difference of what real power is. Contrast Herod's display of power with that of a God who reveals himself as a small, vulnerable and powerless baby. When you think about it, Emmanuel – God-with-us – wouldn't really mean all that much if it was only God with us during the celebrations and times which leave us with a warm glow. When the world comes crashing down on us and we see the unjust, sad and tragic elements of life know that God is there with us. We forget, this is exactly the world God chose to be born into, a world of injustice, cruelty and danger.

Sometimes we have to look a little beyond the immediately obvious to find true meaning. We have to scratch beneath the surface to seek the real love God sent us in Christ. Love that is so strong that it can be with us in every aspect of our life's journey through sadness and suffering as well as in the good times.

The Herods in the world are not new either, but here is the good news that needs to be repeated over and over again. As the gospel of John says, the light came into the world and the darkness did not overcome it. It cannot overcome it. It will not ever overcome it. Not even Herod with all his power and position could extinguish the light of Christ – God's greatest gift for all time, not just two thousand years ago, but for you and me, today and forever.

This Wednesday is the Feast of the Epiphany and the beginning of the Epiphany season which is all about darkness and light and how do we find the light in our own lives. It's not just about how do we find the light when we feel covered in darkness but it is also about us carrying the light into whatever darkness we find. St. Paul wrote in Romans, Corinthians and Galatians that the light of Christ rests in each one of us. God's own spirit resides deep within us. How do we tap into that? How do we see it? How do we follow it?

In her book, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal priest tells this story about a French resistance fighter in World War II. At the age of seven, Jacques Lusseyran was blinded in an accident and rather than following what was the cultural norm at the time, his parents kept him in public schools and mainstreamed him. His mother learned Braille right along with him and his father encouraged him to “always tell them when he discovered something new.” In the months following his accident, he made the astounding discovery of a “rainbow-filled world within.” Part of what he discovered was that even though he couldn’t see and was externally in the dark, there was a light within him and that light helped him to perceive the difference in trees and in barriers and all sorts of things around him.

He said, “Inside me there was everything I had believed was outside. There was, in particular, the sun, light, and all colors. There were even the shapes of objects and the distance between objects. Everything was there and movement as well... Light is an element that we carry inside us and which can grow there with as much abundance, variety, and intensity as it can outside of us...I could light myself...that is, I could create a light inside of me so alive, so large, and so near that my eyes, my physical eyes, or what remained of them, vibrated, almost to the point of hurting... God is there under a form that has the good luck to be neither religious, not intellectual, nor sentimental, but quite simply alive.”

He also learned that it would change depending on his internal condition. When he was angry or sad, the light dimmed; when he was joyful and embracing love, he could clearly see the light again. What he learned was that if he wanted to stay in the presence of the light, he needed to love, that love was the key to the light.

In 1944, Jacques and 2000 French resistance fighters were captured by the Germans and put in prison in Buchenwald and he learned this lesson even more acutely because he discovered that when he would succumb to the anger and the hate and the violence that was all around him, the light went out. He started running into things and tripping over furniture. But when he could pull himself back and go to that place inside where the light and the life and the love abide, he could navigate his environment again. He could make his way through the darkness in the world that surrounded him—the hate, the anger, the violence

Isn’t that true of you and me? If we can abide in God’s presence in our life and live out that love that surpasses all understanding, we, too, can navigate our way in this world. Winston Churchill once said that “The future is unknowable, but the past should make us hopeful.”

The key, I believe, is truly the light that came into this world and the darkness could not overcome it. Jacques learned probably the greatest lesson, that no one could turn off the light within him without his consent. By the way he was liberated from the concentration camp in 1945 and wrote a book about his life called *And there was Light* that I quoted from.

Christ came. Christ continues to come and to show us the light. Christmas is about that light of love for all of us for every day, rather than for a season. Our challenge is to abide in that light and let it lead us in love, out into a hurting and sometimes darkened world. As the words of the hymn say *Star of wonder, star of night, star with royal beauty bright; westward leading, still proceeding, guide us to thy perfect Light.* Amen.