“Ever Seeking” - 1/1/23 - Stephanie Sorge

Well friends, my good run ends here. In 14 years of ministry, I have successfully avoided preaching on this passage, often called the “slaughter of the innocents.” Our Advent and Christmas themed liturgy from A Sanctified Art ends today, and the focus in the liturgy is on seeking. Searching the heavens and contemplating the stars. So why did they include this second part of the story? Can’t we just focus on the Epiphany? I guess I could, but to be honest, Rachel grabbed me and wouldn’t let go.

This second reading comes up in the Revised Common Lectionary - on this very Sunday, in fact - the First Sunday after Christmas Day in Year A. In other words, following the Revised Common Lectionary, we would hear this story before Epiphany, before the Magi. But it is the story of the Magi that explains what is happening here.

Matthew’s gospel begins with the genealogy and birth of Jesus, but without the fanfare of shepherds and angels. It is the visit of the Magi to Herod’s court that alerts Herod to the potential newborn rival for the throne, and it’s that alert that results in the decree to kill all of the children in and around Bethlehem, under the age of 2. By then, Jesus, Mary, and Joseph were safe in Egypt, but many others weren’t.

Herod the Great wasn’t great - that is to say, he wasn’t a good person. He was put in place in Jerusalem and given the title “King of the Jews” because of the success of his father, Antipater, a Roman governor who was faithful to the Empire.

Herod had visions of grandeur. He built magnificent cities, financed the Olympic games one year, and he was rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem. Not out of piety or devotion, but as a vanity project. These expensive projects required extensive taxation, so the people weren’t too pleased with him. However, he was also pretty brutal, so what could they do?

This story of the slaughter of the innocents is horrific, but it isn’t any more grisly than atrocities carried out by Herod or other political rulers in those days. One of Herod’s wives was from the Hasmonean dynasty, the ruling dynasty of the Jews before Herod was put in place. He realized that their children might pose a threat to his rule, so he had them killed, along with his wife, their mother.

Herod would have gone to any length to protect his power, so when the Magi told him that a new “king of the Jews” had been born, he called together the chief priests and legal experts to learn more. They looked to Micah’s prophesy that named Bethlehem, and the order to kill went out.

I wonder if Herod thought he had succeeded in killing the newborn king. He must have always lived on edge, expecting his power to be challenged on all sides. Fear and power are a deadly combination.

Finally Herod died, and Jesus, Mary, and Joseph returned from Egypt, but Jesus remained a threat to the political state, leading, finally, to his death.

This is a horrible Christmas story! I want to be able to stay in the bubble of celebrations and new starts. We have 12 days of Christmas. Today is day 8 - the day of maids ‘a milking. Of course, since this comes after the Epiphany, it’s not really a Christmas story, except for its placement in the season by the lectionary committee. What were they thinking?

Placing this on the first Sunday after Christmas does remind us that from the very beginning, Jesus challenged the brutal powers that be. His very existence was a threat to the state and all that it represents. And when power is threatened, when entrenched systems are challenged, they fight back.

We celebrate the birth of the one who came to abolish death dealing systems of power and empire. Jesus would certainly do that in his lifetime, but even his birth was enough to start the tremor and tremble of turning the world around.

This story ought to shake us, because the powers and systems in which we live, operate, and quite often, thrive, are rightly challenged by the impending reign of Christ. If we hold the values of God made known to us in Jesus Christ as a mirror to our lives and society, how do we fare?

We are so thoroughly enveloped in systems that do not bless the ones that Jesus blesses: the poor, the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those who are hungry and thirsty for righteousness, those who are persecuted because of it, and those who weep and mourn. We are caught up in systems that trample the poor, that fail to execute justice, that enslave and kill. We are products of these systems, and we mostly benefit from them. An upheaval of these powers doesn’t bode well for many of us.

So do we challenge them? Do we seek Christ’s way while we’re mired in this mess? The cost of doing that can be great, too. Countless innocents have been slaughtered by the powers and systems that reign, and when people start to stand up to those powers, it’s at great personal risk.

One reason the slaughter of the innocents is so chilling is because it is directly the result of Christ’s birth. When the powers and principalities of the world are challenged, they will go to great lengths to maintain their power. Jesus came for the salvation of all, but his birth was enough to cause a massacre of innocent babies and toddlers. That’s a hard balance to hold.

In the 2000 years since, many others have followed Jesus at the cost of their lives, particularly in times and places where doing so was illegal. Others have lost their lives standing up to corrupt powers of state. Activism that takes following Jesus seriously can be deadly.

But children? The Coventry Carol was written around 500 years ago, based on this story. It is a lullaby sung to those children facing death. The mothers of the children sing together, weeping for their babies. It’s a song that took on a new layer of meaning when it was sung from the ruins of the Coventry Cathedral on Christmas Day in 1940, a month after it had been bombed in a blitzkrieg.

There is so much innocent death and suffering in our world. I guess it’s better to encounter stories like this in Scripture than for the Bible to remain silent. This story is a reminder that the pain and suffering of the world is seen and felt by God. The weeping of Rachel bears witness to this suffering. As her wails echo through time, they demand our attention.

Rachel is an interesting character. She was the favored daughter of Laban, the long-intended aim of Jacob’s labor, the jealous sister, the wife who could not get pregnant, and the mother who eventually lost her life giving birth to her second son. She doesn’t weep in Genesis. Jeremiah ascribes weeping to her, in context of the exile, but she is given consolation. In Matthew? There is no consolation. Only tears.

When Jacob met Rachel, he was instantly smitten. She was coming in with her father’s sheep, because she was a shepherd. In the Bible, shepherding is a metaphor for leading God’s people. When Herod consulted the chief priests and legal experts, they referred to Micah’s prophesy, of the one who would come from Bethlehem and shepherd God’s people.

This is a tale of two shepherds - Jesus, just a baby, and Rachel, the long-deceased, unconsoled mother. God with us, Jesus Christ, came to lead God’s people. And God with those who have lost so much, who cannot find solace, shepherded here through the tears of Rachel. The Coventry Carol may as well be Rachel’s haunting lullaby from her grave in Ramah.

God is deep in the work of turning the world in the person of Jesus Christ, and God also witnesses the weeping and agony of the victims of the powers that Jesus came to overturn. Not just the power of the state, but the power of death itself. The power of weeping, and loss, and pain. The power of shame and humiliation.

God is still at work in the world, continuing the world turning work of justice and reconciliation. The work will continue until every power of death and evil is destroyed. The work will continue until all have been consoled. But until that time, God is present in the world, bearing witness to the terrors and deepest sorrows, and making space - giving a shepherdess - for grief and lament. This is God with us.

I’m sorry. I wanted this to be a more uplifting start to the new year. But maybe it’s appropriate, too. Like the Magi, we are still seeking. We are seeking a better year, a better way. We are seeking signs of the world turning, and discerning our part in that. We are seeking the reign that God has promised and the finality of what has been accomplished in Jesus Christ.

While we seek, while we wait, while we search for a better way forward, we do so knowing that God is still shepherding us through our struggles. As we see the terror and suffering of God’s children around the world, we pray for peace. And we know that God is present in the weeping and grief, too. Consolation will come, but not too early. Not until things are set right. God will turn the world and set things right, but we aren’t there yet. Until that time, we seek together. And God is with us. Amen.