



**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School**

1611 E Main St., Watertown, WI 53094

(920)261-2570

[www.goodshepherdwi.org](http://www.goodshepherdwi.org)

---

**First Sunday After Christmas**

**December 29, 2013**

---

## **“Into Our Chaos”**

*(Matthew 2:16 & John 1:14)*

Rev. David K. Groth

*“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. . .” (Matthew 2:16).*

*“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (Jn. 1:14).*

### **Collect of the Day**

O God, our Maker and Redeemer, You wonderfully created us and in the incarnation of Your Son yet more wondrously restored our human nature. Grant that we may ever be alive in Him who made Himself to be like us; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

**Amen**

When Herod figured out he had been duped, he got angry. Historians tell us whenever Herod got angry people died. In this particular case Herod orders all males in Bethlehem, two years old and younger, to be killed. His assumption is the infant Jesus will be one of them.

Archaeologists believe at the time Bethlehem and the surrounding area had about a thousand residents, which means there would have been about 20-25 children two years old or younger living there. Half of those are girls. Therefore historians believe the soldiers killed about twelve little boys. We must not exaggerate the number, as has been done in the past, but a smaller number makes the act no less wicked. These infants are the first to be killed because of Jesus. We don't know their names. But we do know that Herod was very capable of such wickedness, and this world is no stranger to such evil. Think Newtown Connecticut.

But the question is, "Why?" Why does God let these things happen? If he is all-knowing, as he says he is, and all-powerful, as he says he is, and that he's just and loves the world, then why did he allow these innocents to be murdered? Surely the grieving parents of Bethlehem were asking that question. And it's a question that is never too far from our lips. Why Lord?

A number of years ago in St. Louis I was awakened by the phone in the middle of the night and called to St. Joseph's hospital. I had been there the day before to baptize a little infant girl who was failing to thrive, the firstborn of a young couple. When I arrived this time the nurse showed me to where the small

family was. The door was open but the curtain was pulled. She knocked on the door jam and pulled back the curtain for me. As I entered the parents looked at me. The husband was on the phone calling family members. The mother was holding the now lifeless body of her little girl, rocking back and forth as if to sooth her infant. They hadn't called me; the grandparents had. I wasn't at all sure the parents wanted me there, and truth be told it was the last place I wanted to be, because it's not easy to enter another's suffering. You don't come out of it unscathed. The mom looked at me and, with a mixture of grief and anger, asked "Why, Pastor?"

How does one answer that question? What possible words can assuage that kind of grief, that kind of anger? In that context, all the platitudes we sometimes resort to crumble under the weight of the moment. "The Lord never gives you more than you can handle?" Nonsense. That's a gross misinterpretation of Scripture. That's in reference to temptation, not to suffering. And losing a child is more than any parent can handle.

"All things work for the good of those who love the Lord?" Time will tell on that one but right now, in that room, that's of little comfort.

"God only takes the best"? Really? How does that square with the fact the death rate is still pretty much 100%.

"The Lord has numbered our days and when our number is up . . . that's it"? Will that kind of fatalism really comfort the parents of a three day old infant?

"So long as we remember her she will never really die"? Seems to me the cemeteries in and around Watertown are full of people who have been forgotten over the generations. Death has brought to them to near perfect anonymity.

So the question at St. Joseph's hospital was: "Why?" The truest answer was: I didn't know and I still don't. And to try to answer that would be to rush in where angels fear to tread. I have theological training to help account for things we cannot understand, but not to give definitive answers. So I didn't say much, but I stayed. I prayed. I sat with them until sunrise, sometimes in silence, sometimes speaking, to let them know they were not alone in their suffering and grief. It was the best I could do, though it didn't feel like nearly enough.

We want to be able to fix things, but there are some things we cannot fix. We want to be able to give black and white answers to tough questions, but those are not always to be found in Scripture. And to push Scripture one way or another so that it delivers black or white is to say more than Scripture has given us to say. It is to put words into God's mouth. It is to wag our own tongues and say, "thus declares the Lord."

My faith has changed over the last twenty years. I no longer expect to have all the answers, nor do I believe people are really looking for them. Second, I don't expect comfort to come from afar. I really do believe that God enters the world through us. That's incarnational theology. He comes to us in human form just as he did 2,000 years ago. More on that in a bit.

Third, I know God curbs evil in the world because he promises he does. But I no longer expect to *see* him curbing evil. After all when he does curb evil, no one will know that he's done it. The day will have come and gone without a blip on the radar or headlines in the newspaper, and also without our prayers of gratitude. But God will have frustrated the plans of wicked men.

Sometimes, however, for whatever reason known only to him, God doesn't stop evil. He allows a King Herod to order the murder of innocent little children hoping that Jesus would be counted among the dead. He allows wicked men to gas a neighborhood of Damascus hoping that rebel fighters would be counted among the dead. He allows a demented shooter to enter a Sikh temple, another to enter a spa, and another a school. He allows the guy who has had way too much to drink to get in his pickup and start driving home. God allows it . . . just as he allowed Adam and Eve to eat from the forbidden fruit. God allows it. Is it his fault then?

I remember at the seminary I wrote a book report in which I was fairly critical of what the author did not say or did not include. I thought the professor would be impressed; I certainly was. But at the bottom of the last page, just under the grade the professor wrote, "Groth, you cannot hang a man for what he has not done." (I'll never forget that!) We are tempted to blame God for man's wickedness. But the fact is God didn't give the order to kill the infants in Bethlehem. Herod did. And God didn't carry those orders out. Soldiers did, even though they surely knew it was wrong, and should have listened to

God rather than man. And God didn't storm a grade school with an assault weapon. And God didn't toss those jets into the twin towers. And God didn't plunge the world into sin in the first place. Man did. These are the acts of sinners, not of a holy and righteous God.

I suppose, if we really wanted to blame God for something, we could blame God for giving us freedom, the freedom to think our own thoughts and make our own decisions. I suppose if we wanted to blame God for something, we could blame him for respecting us, treating us with dignity, as men and women created in his own image. He does not control us as if we were made of wood or stone. He puts high expectations on us and treats us with a respect we did not earn and a trust we do not deserve and gives us a freedom that each of us finds ways to misuse. Sin falls squarely on our shoulders, not God's. "You cannot hang a man for what he did not do."

So if not preventing the accident or the evil, what is God doing? Is he just sitting there passively watching it all unfold, indifferent to our grief and suffering? Not at all. One definition of mercy is "entering the chaos of another." "Entering the chaos." God doesn't always stir up his power to prevent the accident or evil, but we can count on him to enter into our chaos and our grief. How does he do that? Again, it's usually through people, through their callings, their vocations as nurses and doctors, through the love and care of family members, and the like.

We pray for miracles. We pray that God would stir up his might and tip the scales at the last possible moment and rescue us or someone we love. We pray God visit us with miraculous healing and relief. But far more often God chooses to come to us in human form, just as he did 2,000 years ago. He works through people like you and me, and is found in the compassion and care and mercy shared between people, sometimes between perfect strangers. He's there in the care and compassion of an EMT or policeman or a hospice volunteer. He's there in the unconditional love of a parent, or a child. In mercy, God enters into our chaos.

It's never easy to enter someone else's chaos, but that's what we're celebrating today. God did not distance himself from us. He did not build up an impregnable wall between us and him. God did not turn his back on us. No. In the words of Philipians, Jesus "emptied himself, and took on the form of a servant . . . And

being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient unto death, even death on a cross” (2:6ff).

He entered our chaos, and he did not come out of it unscathed. In fact his body still bears the marks of the crucifixion.

“You cannot hang a man for what he did not do”.

But Jesus did hang for what he did not do. The sin which was ours alone, fell squarely on his shoulders. On the cross, God was blamed for our wickedness. And he willingly took that on and paid the just price for your sin and mine.

Jesus entered our chaos. That’s what we’ve been celebrating this past week, and that’s what we’re counting on in the future. That God is not sequestered in some safe and remote corner of heaven, but that he’s with us, every step, even in the valley of the shadow of death, not necessarily fixing things with his power, or taking away our grief with his might, but he is with us. Immanuel. God with us . . . in our chaos. Often, that’s what we need the most, not a theological treatise as to why we are suffering, but just the assurance there is someone who cares, someone who is with us, and someone who has the power and the authority and love to pull us out of the dark pit of despair and lead us into the eternal light of his presence.

I don’t know why God permits people like Herod to do the things he did, or why he permits you and me, for that matter, to do the evil we do. But I do know that he loved those infants, because he tells us so, and I know for those infants and their parents, even for Herod and his soldiers, and for you and me . . . and for that little girl at St. Joseph’s hospital, “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” He entered into our chaos, and remains our Immanuel. Thanks be to God. Amen.



