

Christmas 1, December 28, 2025, Year A
Matthew 2.13-23
Pr. Renee Splichal Larson

Grace and peace to you from the One who has died for us all, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

There is a true story about a village and how goodness happened there. The story takes place “during the most terrible years of World War II,” where whole ethnicities of people, especially Jews, were singled out, hunted down, taken to concentration camps, and murdered. In the midst of this violence, “a miraculous event took place in a small Protestant town in southern France called Le Chambon. There, quietly, peacefully, and in full view” of a government determined to exterminate human beings, including children, “Le Chambon’s villagers and their clergy organized to save thousands of Jewish children and adults from certain death.”¹

This profound story is found in the book called: “Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed,” written by Philip Hallie. It is well worth the read, but what I want to share with you is in the introduction of the book, where the author writes about a lecture and discussion that took place a few years after it was published. He was speaking to a group of women in Minneapolis, who “were all leading fund raisers for the United Jewish Appeal.”

When his lecture was over, he asked for questions or comments. “A woman in the back of the room stood up and asked him if the village of Le Chambon was in the Department of Haute-Loire in south-central France where the great Loire River has its origin.” Philip confirmed that it was the village he was talking about.

He writes: “She stood there silent for what seemed to be a long time and then she said, ‘Well, you have been speaking about the village that saved the lives of all three of my children.’

“She came to the front of the room, turned to face the audience, and said, ‘The Holocaust was storm, lightning, thunder, wind, rain, yes. And Le Chambon was the rainbow.”²

Perhaps the rainbow in our Gospel reading for the first Sunday after Christmas, is the dream God gave Joseph, that saved the Christ child. “Get up, 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.” Joseph gets up, takes the child and his mother by night, goes to Egypt, and remains there until the death of Herod.”³

In this story, the infant Jesus is spared. But a cruel foreshadowing looms; he will not be spared on the cross. Jesus is saved here from certain death, in order that he may save the whole world.

But there were many others who were not saved that day. All of the infants and toddlers under the age of 2, in and around Bethlehem, were murdered. Is there anything we can imagine that is worse than infants being ripped from their parents’ arms and slaughtered?

¹ *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*, by Philip Hallie (Back cover).

² Hallie, pp. xvi-xvii.

³ Matt. 23.13-15.

This is the part of the Christmas story we don't want to hear or face. Jesus is born into a world where innocents die.

Within a few short days we go from the angel's joyful "halleluiah" and "peace on earth," to unconsolable weeping. Verse 18 in the Gospel of Matthew quotes Jeremiah, chapter 31, verse 15:

"A voice was heard in Ramah wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children she refused to be consoled, because they are no more."

The context of this verse in Jeremiah rises up out of the exile of the Jewish people to Babylon. Ramah was a gathering place for the people of Judah who were being deported to Babylon after Jerusalem was conquered. Rachel weeps for all of her people who live under the boot of the powerful.

If Jacob is the Father of Israel, then Rachel is its mother and matriarch. Rachel weeps again for the babies and toddlers, whose lives were cut short because of a power-hungry, puppet king.

When I spoke to my 10-year-old about this story, he paused for a long moment and said, "Herod killed all those babies and didn't get anything out of it." He dies anyway. And isn't this the leveling we all need to face? Death itself.

In the end, even God's son is not spared from death.

Pr. Roger Nelson in the most recent issue of the *Christian Century Magazine* writes this:

The outlandish claim of the gospels is that God became flesh not in the world of nativity snow globes, shiny happy people, and naïve spirituality but in the world where tyrants kill babies and parents can't be consoled. If the incarnation has any meaning at all, then God came into the darkest realities of this world.⁴

Many theologians believe that the saving act of God is the incarnation, the birth of Christ into the world; for in being born, he will surely die ... and this is good news for each of us and for the world. Jesus brings deliverance when everything seems bleak.

We live in a world where death, violence, and war happen because people love power and wealth more than God and neighbor, where the Herods are not held accountable. Jesus shows us a different way of being in the world.

Instead of grasping for power, Jesus empties himself, even to the point of death on a cross. Instead of condemning sinners, he forgives. Instead of ignoring the sick, he heals. Instead of hating enemies, he pours out his love and dies. This is so different than Herod's fear-driven life, as Jesus ushers in the Kingdom of God here on earth.

⁴ *Christian Century Magazine*, December 2025, p. 29.

The Good News is not front and center on this day in the season of Christmas in which we observe the slaughter of the innocents. It feels like a lot of law, where human beings literally get away with murder. This story leaves us at the foot of the manger and also the cross, in need of a savior, God made flesh. We need Jesus. This world God loves so much, needs Christ.

What I've had to admit about this story is that Herod needs a savior too; that the awful truth, which is also Good News, is that Jesus was born and died for Herod, as he was born and died for you and for me, and certainly the children who met their end far too soon in Bethlehem.

Pr. Nelson continues in the *Christian Century Magazine*:

The mystery of Christmas is that Jesus is born into the world as it stands—the world to which we wake again and again. The world of school shootings, terrorist states, rulers who feel threatened, and parents who bury children. The world in which Rachel weeps.

God doesn't rise above, whisk away, or shrug off this world. From cradle to cross God enters in, shares, and bears our pain. Our hope, even in the nativity, is that God in Christ is resurrecting monuments of stone and overthrowing tyrants—and we are not alone.⁵

It is true that Christ promises to be with us always, and we also have one another. I marvel at the story of Le Chambon. The people who peacefully and steadfastly lived out the Kingdom of God, saving life after life. They did not let the Herods of the world get away with murder. They lived as if every life was precious to God, even at the risk of their own.

I wonder what the Holy Family found in Egypt. It is absolutely clear in the Gospel of Matthew that Jesus and his parents were refugees, fleeing to Egypt to escape death. I imagine this exile shaped and formed our Lord in significant ways. I wonder if he grew up learning that he was the only child to survive a massacre. I wonder if he brought to mind the children killed by Herod's order, when later in his ministry in Matthew chapter 19, he says: "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs."⁶

I wonder how Jesus' experience of being refugee influenced what he had to say in Matthew 25: "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom ... for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me."⁷

Jesus knew what it felt like to flee with only the clothes on his back. To watch his parents make a life for him in a new place, in a new language. Were they welcomed or turned away?

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Matt. 19.13.

⁷ Matt. 25.34-36.

Matthew chapter 2 reminds us that the Christmas story does not only encompass a star and a manger, angels singing, Mary pondering, and shepherds and wise men worshipping; but, equally important, is God's guidance through dreams, Rachel's tears, Jesus' life threatened before he could walk, and a ruthless king who would even kill babies to hold onto his power.

Today the Church remembers the children Herod slaughtered. December 28th is the day we commemorate "The Holy Innocents." Verse 6 in hymn number #430 in the Evangelical Lutheran Worship Book memorializes the little ones who died:

All praise for infant martyrs,
Whom you with tend'rest love,
Received from Herod's bloodshed,
To share your home above.
O Rachel, cease your weeping;
They rest from earthbound cares.
Lord, grant us hearts as guileless,
And crowns as bright as theirs.

How strange it is to read a story such as this in the Gospel of Matthew on the first Sunday of Christmas, but I for one, am glad for it. Sorrow is not without joy, and joy is not without sorrow. We can be singing Christmas hymns, and yet lament that all our relationships are not reconciled, or that this Christmas is the first without a loved one, or that children go to bed hungry, or the gap between the rich and the poor keeps widening, or the political polarization keeps us from loving our neighbors as we ought.

It turns out, we still need a savior.

It turns out, we need reminding that God speaks to us through dreams, and God makes a way where there seems to be none.

It turns out, villages like Le Chambon, truly exude the Kingdom of God in this world and make a difference for many.

Philip Hallie concludes in his introduction to the book, *Lest Innocent Blood be Shed*:

"The rainbow reminds God and humankind that life is precious to God, that God offers not only sentimental hope, but a promise that living will have the last word, not killing."⁸

Isn't this the Good News? That God has the last word, and God's word is life for you and for the world. In this season of Christmas we celebrate Jesus our light, the light no darkness can overcome. And for this we say, "Thanks be to God."

⁸ Hallie, p. xvii.