

## FIRST SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS (A)

Matthew 2:13-23  
December 30, 2007

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In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*“Silent night, holy night!*

*All is calm,*

*all is bright round yon virgin mother and child.*

*Holy infant, so tender and mild,*

*Sleep in heavenly peace.”*

That beautiful 19<sup>th</sup> century carol seems to capture the essence of the Christmas story for us. It paints a word picture so *peaceful* and *serene*; so *calm* and so *soothing*. We love it, and we love all that it stands for.

In his Gospel, St. Luke tells us that the Blessed Virgin Mary “*brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn*” in Bethlehem. Now in all honesty, childbirth itself is a fairly harrowing experience. Even if there are no complications, it is a traumatic time. And Mary had no doctor or nurses, and there is no mention of a midwife. And of course the birth itself apparently took place not in a hospital or even in a home, but rather in some kind of stable.

But in spite of the crude, elemental setting, in spite of the truth about the tribulation of childbirth, we still find that scene to be just *beautiful*. I daresay it is likely that most every one of our homes probably has at least one nativity scene set up, at this time of year. We love the sight of Blessed Mary and Joseph hovering over the Christ child, of the shepherds coming to give their homage, of the wisemen bringing their gifts, and even the animals — perhaps some sheep, a cow and a donkey — all gathering around the manger to offer their adoring worship.

All well and good. It is only right and proper that we should *rejoice*, and find *peace* and *solace*, in the story of the birth of the savior, God’s Messiah.

But the truth is, the story doesn’t stay *very peaceful* for very long. In today’s Gospel, on this sixth day of Christmas, we hear St. Matthew’s account of King Herod’s bloodthirsty search for Jesus. Herod got wind that the wisemen were searching for a child who was to be the “*king of the Jews,*” and *that frightened him*. When the wisemen failed to report to him of the specific whereabouts of the child, Herod was enraged. In his anger and in his desperation, he sent his soldiers to kill *all* the children in Bethlehem, who were under the age of two. Can you imagine the sadness in those families? I really don’t think I can. It must have been absolutely horrible, and heartbreaking.

And in all honesty, we don’t usually spend much time thinking about King Herod and his wicked deed. It’s just not something we want to dwell on. We much prefer the peaceful scene at the manger:

“*Silent night, holy night!*  
*All is calm,*  
*all is bright. . .*  
*Holy infant, so tender and mild,*  
*Sleep in heavenly peace.”*

Don’t interrupt that scene with any mention of Herod and his bloody campaign to find and kill the baby!

But dear friends, if we really want to understand who Jesus is, we need to reckon with the story of Herod, and his slaughter of the children of Bethlehem. Herod wanted to kill Jesus, because Jesus threatened his power and his authority. Herod of course, was king — king of the Jews. And so he simply could not tolerate anyone else who was born to be the king.

Now Herod was obviously confused about what *kind* of king Jesus was going to be. The only kind of king Herod understood was an *earthly* king, a king with *political power*, a king with soldiers and a mighty army. But although he didn’t understand what *kind* of king Jesus was to be, Herod was *absolutely right* in perceiving that Jesus would exercise a type of authority that would call into question his own. Herod was *absolutely correct* in perceiving that Jesus would *challenge his world*. Herod was absolutely correct in discerning that Jesus would *threaten* his way of life, and his way of dealing with the world.

*Herod knew that the baby wouldn’t stay in the manger.* Herod didn’t realize what kind of king this baby would be, but he understood that his world was *threatened* by this child, who was born to be the “*king of the Jews.*”

And of course, our world — *your* world — *my* world, is *threatened* as well. Because this one whose birth we celebrate, *doesn’t stay in the manger*. Jesus is not just a cute baby in the arms of his mother. He grew up. And when he was about 33 years old, he died on a cross *for you*. And then he was raised from the dead *for you*. He ascended into heaven, and now he *rules* from the right hand of the Father. *He is the king*, and he *claims you* as one of his beloved subjects.

*Jesus loves you.* And because he loves you, and because he is the king, he calls you *to follow him*. He comes to *challenge* your world. He comes to *threaten* your way of life and your way of dealing with the world. Because he calls you *to obey him*. He calls you *to live for him*. He calls you to let go of living for yourself, and *to serve him instead*.

Dorothy Day, who died in 1980 was a well-known Christian activist. She was deeply committed to social justice and to helping the poor. But Dorothy didn’t grow up as a Christian. She was born in 1897, and as a young woman in the 1920’s she lived a rather wild life. She had numerous love affairs. She had a short marriage, and a longer cohabitation. Dorothy had an abortion, followed by the pain of being abandoned by the father of the child. Later she had a child born out of

wedlock. Dorothy titled her autobiographical account of those early years, “*The Long Loneliness*”. And she wrote of that period, “*I really led a very **shiftless** life, doing. . .exactly what **I wanted** to do.*”

But shortly after the birth of her daughter, Dorothy was baptized. And as she saw nuns caring day after day for the destitute, Dorothy gradually was moved to commit her own life to serving Jesus, by working for the poor. Indeed, she lived a life of voluntary poverty, devoting herself to raising her daughter and to caring for the needy and the homeless. Of this later time in her life, she writes: “*I was tired of following the devices and desires of **my own heart**, of doing what **I wanted** to do, what my desires told me I wanted to do, which always seemed to lead me astray.*” “*I had reached the point where **I wanted to obey**. . .*”

In the film based on her life, one moving scene shows Dorothy storming into church after a day of terrible disappointments. And she stands before a crucifix, and she asks: “***What do you want from me?***” And the answer, Dorothy gradually comes to understand is “***Everything.***” Jesus wants *everything* from her. He wants her *love*. He wants her *obedience*. He wants her *trust*. He wants her *heart*. He wants *all of her*.

And of course, our Lord Jesus wants the very same from you. He wants *everything* from you. He wants your *love*. He wants your *obedience*. He wants your *trust*. He wants your *heart*. He wants *all of you*.

And that, dear friends, is *threatening*. King Herod isn’t the only one threatened by Jesus. We are as well. *Because Jesus doesn’t stay in the manger*. And he won’t let you keep him there. He is the *king*. The king who died and rose again to save *you*. And he will not rest until he has you. *All of you*.

In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.