

## Wesley United Methodist Church

January 1, 2017

“A Word of Hope for a Hard World.”

Matthew 2:13-23

If you ever felt like your life was out of control, then you can relate to the adventures of Tattoo, a basset hound from Tacoma, Washington. One evening, Tattoo's owner headed out for a drive. He didn't notice that Tattoo's leash had gotten caught in the car door. Police officer Terry Filbert, patrolling the neighborhood on his motorcycle, spotted the poor dog running—and occasionally rolling—along side the car. The officer stopped Tattoo's owner and alerted him to the situation. Tattoo came out all right, but he hasn't been begging for any walks for a while, He's kind of content to stay at home.

You may feel like Tattoo after these last few weeks. This is such a busy time of the year. But now Christmas has passed. The presents have been opened. The empty boxes, the pretty paper on the floor, the stray tinsel from the tree with which the cat has played and left abandoned on the sofa, the empty cartons of Eggnog stuffed into the trash can all have disappeared. Life has come back to normal, whatever that is. Now, let's kick off our running shoes and relax.

Unfortunately, it wasn't that easy for Mary and Joseph. After the shepherds had gone back to their flocks and the wise men had gone back to the east, Mary and Joseph had to flee for their lives and the life of their newborn son. After following the star into the region of Judea, the magi were uncertain of their destination, so they had consulted with King Herod, seeking the birthplace of the newborn king. Herod was immediately alarmed that a child had been born who would one day be king. Herod was not going to give up his throne without a fight.

You need to know that Herod was an evil and violent man. He was married to ten women. He had fifteen children. Ten of them were boys. As his ten sons grew up and became men, they were destined to become king. Herod did not trust his sons and he accused two of them of treason. In the year 7 B.C., these two sons were sent to Rome, put on trial, and assassinated. In 4 B.C., Herod also killed his oldest son.

No wonder that Caesar Augustus said of Herod: “It's better to be Herod's pig than Herod's son.”

That's the kind of man Herod was. So, after he discovered that the wise men were not returning to give him directions to the newborn king's birthplace, Herod would give orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and in its vicinity who were two years old and under. That's perfectly consistent with his character. As a writer once put it, “For all his enormous power, he knew there was somebody in diapers more powerful still.”

The Scriptures are realistic about the human condition. There are evil people in this world. We would rather that this story of the slaughter of the innocents were not in the Christmas story. But it is, because that is the kind of world we inhabit. Mary and Joseph were not exempt from it either.

After the wise men had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. “Get up,” he said, “take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.” So Joseph got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where they stayed until the death of Herod.

The holy family left just in time, for when Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the wise men, he was furious, and gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old or younger. Such was the cruelty of the king of Judea.

After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up and take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child's life are dead.” So Joseph got up, took Mary and the child and went to the land of Israel as he was told. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, Joseph withdrew to the district of Galilee. And there he raised his family in a town called Nazareth.

We complain because we have to go back to the real world after Christmas, but our world doesn't compare to the world of this young family we have been celebrating these past four weeks. They lived in a world where a cruel tyrant could order all infants and toddlers to be put to death. They lived in a world where, even after Herod's death, they could not be certain they would be safe. Herod's sons were as cruel as he.

So, Christmas is over. Where does that leave us? Over the weeks of Advent we celebrated the good news of Luke and the prophecy of Isaiah. When the Messiah comes, Isaiah said, the world will have light and love and peace and joy. The faithful will sing in delight, for Immanuel, God with us, will be born. And he was born. And the world was forever changed. But what now?

Where is all the light, love, peace, and joy when Christmas is over? That light of Christmas, the love of God, the peace that passes all understanding, and the joy of Jesus Christ live on in us and we are summoned to share these gifts with all we meet.

Life is hard. The story of Herod is a stark reminder of that truth. This is a scary world in many ways. But evil does not have the final word. The babe was born to die. We will witness his arrest by the soldiers, his crucifixion on a cross, his burial in a borrowed tomb. Yes, there are Herods in this world. But they cannot defeat God. Because we know that the tomb will be empty within three days of Christ's death and we will celebrate victory over sin and death when we proclaim Jesus Christ is risen, he is risen indeed.

No matter what the year 2017 will bring, with God all things are possible. Amen.