

The second Sunday of Christmas is often a tough reality check. We're done with the baby lying in the manger. Instead, our Gospel lesson for this morning gives us a rather abrupt wake up call. Our Gospel from the 2nd Chapter of Matthew gives us a rather brusque counterpoint to the warm fuzzy feelings of Christmas.

Matthew 2 brings us face to face with an evil king, dead toddlers, and a family of refugees.

The old Kenny Rogers song sounds like the theme song for this morning's Gospel:
*You got to know when to hold 'em,
know when to fold 'em;
know when to walk away,
and know when to run.*

For Joseph and the Holy Family, it's time to fold, and it's time to run.

The Wisemen have just left Bethlehem. You may remember that they were warned not to pay a return visit to King Herod, but to go home by another route.

Joseph also receives a warning in a dream. Joseph is basically told, 'King Herod's about to come to wipe out your son. So you'd better get going. Take your family and high tail it down to Egypt.'

Joseph knows how to pay attention to his dreams. He takes Jesus and Mary, and they flee to Egypt.

And it's just in the nick of time. Our Gospel lesson skips over the next part, and I can't blame it, because it's a dark and brutal episode. King Herod orders his soldiers to kill some children, which we term the Slaughter of the Holy Innocents.

King Herod is infuriated by the double crossing Wisemen. Herod is THE King of the Jews. He is threatened by the presence of anyone in his kingdom who might claim that title. He certainly isn't going to put up with any threats from some toddler who is being called King of the Jews.

So Herod orders the massacre of all baby boys in Bethlehem aged two and under.

Historically, there's no doubt about King Herod's brutality. He killed a couple of his own brothers in order to secure his claim to the throne. He later killed a couple of his own sons in order to preserve his throne.

So the slaughter of the toddler boys of Bethlehem is certainly in character for Herod. But in spite of Herod's worst efforts, the infant Jesus escapes the sword.

It's a rather sad ending to the Christmas story we're so familiar with. It stands in opposition to the sweetness and light of the images we have of the birth of Jesus. When we think

of Christmas, the first images that usually spring to mind are not a family fleeing for their lives, or a bunch of toddlers lying dead in Bethlehem.

Our sense of justice and fair play would tell us that such things should not happen. Toddlers should not be executed by paranoid tyrants. Families should not have to become refugees to save themselves. God should intervene and put a stop to such things.

After all, we expect God to take care of things. We expect God to step in with force if necessary. We expect God to fix things. And we get upset if God doesn't.

I remember my gut reaction on September 11, 2001. "God, why didn't you protect us from these evil people?"

This past year, in a time of pandemic, we might ask God to magically stop a terrible disease like COVID.

And I bet there were plenty of mothers in Bethlehem who wished that God would have intervened and saved their children. I bet they were hoping that God would have sent down fire from heaven to wipe out Herod's soldiers before they started killing their babies.

We wish that God would step in to take away our pain. We hope that God will take away our suffering. We expect God to act like insulation, shielding us from all of the bad things that happen in life.

Yet God works in a different way. And we see that in Matthew.

Matthew's Gospel doesn't stop with Herod killing toddlers and Jesus escaping to Egypt. There's more. And it's a vitally important part of the Good News of Jesus. It is important, for it tells us much of what God is like.

At first, it looks like Herod wins. Herod doesn't kill Jesus, but he does remove him as a threat. Jesus is in exile in Egypt.

But Matthew doesn't stop there. There's more to the story. Evil does not win. Herod does not stop Jesus. Jesus escapes. Herod dies. And Jesus is able to return to Israel and grow up there to carry out his mission.

And thirty some odd years later, the forces of evil attempt again to destroy Jesus, this time by crucifixion. But once again, evil does not win. Jesus is the Lord of Life and triumphs over the forces of evil and death, both in Bethlehem, and later, in Jerusalem.

The manner of Jesus' victory is probably not the kind of victory any of us would pick. Most of us human beings go to great lengths to avoid hardship or pain or suffering. But Jesus doesn't do this.

Instead of taking away our hardships and our pain and our suffering, God in the person of Jesus Christ, chooses to do something radically different. God does something unexpected.

God in Jesus Christ chooses to take upon himself our hardship, our pain, and our suffering. God chooses to become Emmanuel, "God with us." God, as one of us, in the person of Jesus Christ, chooses to participate fully in our humanity. God becomes a vulnerable human being. And as one of us, Jesus suffers and endures the worst that we humans can dish out, even death on a cross.

By doing this, God shows us that evil does not have the final say. Death does not have the last word. The powers of evil and darkness can try to do their worst. They can cause pain, they can cause suffering, and they can even cause death. But they don't have the final word. God's power is stronger than pain. God's power transcends suffering. God's power overcomes even death.

It's important for us to remember this. This is the 10th day of Christmas. And it's an unusual Christmas in the midst of a pandemic.

It's the first Sunday of 2021, after a horribly dark and difficult 2020.

And yet, in 2021, we still proclaim the Good News that Jesus Christ has come into our world. Darkness does not win. Death does not win.

We may be in temporary exile now. We may have to stay in the Egypt of pandemic for a little while longer.

But the exile will end.
God will call us out of Egypt.
God will bring us home.