

Sermon on 1ChristmasA: Isaiah 63:7-9, Hebrews 2:10-18, Matthew 2:13-23
Preached at Custer Lutheran Fellowship on 12-30-2007 by Pastor David Van Kley

On the Sixth Day of Christmas...

Asked a friend the other day, “why don’t we make as much fuss over the twelve days of Christmas as we do over the 4 weeks of Advent? Seems like we could—and should—savor the good news for a while!” And so, her family lights a candle on each of the twelve days, celebrating the coming of the child.

How does that sound to you? Sounds pretty good to me! What if, on this, the first and only Sunday in the Christmas season on the Church calendar, we sang the “Twelve Days of Christmas?” And today’s sermon explored the meaning of these lyrics: “on the sixth day of Christmas my true love gave to me, six geese a laying”? Not that any of us would know what to do with such a Christmas gift!

But I’d rather wonder about **that** than hear the story from today’s gospel: a horrific story about an insecure and brutal king who kills all the boys under two in the town of Bethlehem. I’ve often wondered: why give us that story so soon after Christmas? Couldn’t the powers that be wait a few weeks to dump this on us? Lent is coming: if we **must** talk about genocide, can’t we do it during **Lent**?

Twenty years ago, a clean cut man stopped in my office and handed me a white supremacist newspaper. The paper claimed that all Jewish people were parasites living off the hard work of Protestant America, the Holocaust was a **hoax**, and Krystall Nacht never happened.

I remember being stunned. The Holocaust a **hoax**? Tell that to Arlene’s stepmother, who sheltered refugees beneath her bed while the Nazi soldiers went door to door searching for Jews in her hometown of Tjum, the Netherlands! Tell that to Mitch Murawski of Custer, whose forearm is indelibly stamped with the numbers of a Nazi prison camp.

We may **wish** the Holocaust was a hoax, but it happened. Hitler happened. Genocide happens all too often: in Rwanda and Bosnia and Iraq. Dictators like Paul Pot, Mao Tse-tung, Joseph Stalin, and Saddam Hussein killed millions of innocent people. September 11 happened and before that it was Oklahoma City and before that it was Lockerbie. On Thursday, just two days after Christmas, an assassin shot Benazir Bhutto, the reform candidate for prime minister in Pakistan, then blew himself and twenty other people to smithereens. That same day, a young couple in Washington State shot all the members of their family.

Not what we want to hear a few days after Christmas! Not what we want to hear, **ever**. And yet, this is the kind of world we live in.

Suffering and violence are part of the story of Christmas. King Herod—the same

man who'd killed one of his wives, his brother in law, and three of his own sons—couldn't tolerate reports of a royal birth in Bethlehem. He wasn't about to wait twenty years to see if the reports were true, so he ordered the murder of all male babies in that village. When life is so cheap, there's no sense taking chances.

So voices were “heard in Ramah,” that day, “wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they (were) no more.” Not what we want to hear five days after Christmas. Or anytime.

Do you know of Joel Osteen, the popular Christian writer and preacher? I guess thousands flock to hear his sermons and millions read his books. I saw a feature on him the other day on “60 Minutes.” Joel Osteen says that if you believe in God, only good things will happen to you! Christianity is the sure way to wealth and health!

Don't you wonder what someone like **that** would do with a text like **this**? Maybe he'd say that Joseph was warned in a dream to run away with Mary and Jesus because Joseph was a man of God and executor of God's plan. Maybe he'd say, “See how God looks after his own?” But that ignores the fact that Jesus' life was spared this time only so that he could die at the hands of the Herod's and Pilate's of the world at a later time, in a still more brutal and more public way. The shadow of a **cross** hangs like a star over the manger. Even if many Christians today, including Joel Osteen, would like to get rid of it!

I know that it's the sixth day of Christmas. But maybe—to quote Anna Carter Florence—by now “people are stuffed to the eyeballs with sugarplums and sick of the taste. The relatives aren't leaving until the day after New Year's. The kids are still home from school. You have six gifts to return to five stores. The house is a wreck, the world is a mess, and we're supposed to be singing **Christmas** carols?! **Please.**”

Which is to say: maybe we're ready for a dose of Christmas **reality**. To face the awful truth that evil happens, even in a post-Christmas world. The truth about sin. About the human willingness to destroy the earth and sacrifice the well-being of others for our own gain. That's the root cause of genocide. And of the gap between rich and poor. And of the terrible secret of abuse that plagues so many families. And of global climate change. When it comes right down to it, in the words of Reinhold Niebuhr, “we human beings are our own most vexing problem.”

So the beautiful news of Christmas must lie here, too, beside this ugly truth. As Isaiah puts it, “in all our distress, it is not a messenger or angel but God's very **presence** that saves us. In love and pity God redeems us, lifts us up and carries us.” In this world of outsourcing, God doesn't outsource **salvation**. God steps right into the thick of it—into our wrecked homes, our messy world, our broken hearts—a divine self bent on grace. The tyrants of this world won't take that news lying down. Not even a few days after Christmas. Which is why baby Jesus must die on a cross. And why God must answer with Easter.

It's strong medicine, I know. God could give us something that only covers up our symptoms, a mild cough drop with a sweet taste. Or six geese a laying. Instead, God prescribes a powerful antibiotic that goes right to the heart of the problem. Immanuel. God with us, even in the depths of our suffering. Believing this, we are saved.

Two days after Christmas, I hit a deer with my truck. It was along that stretch of US 16A, just past Woodland Meadows, approaching the town of Custer. The deer seemed to come from nowhere, up out of the ditch and right into the path of my vehicle. I swerved and braked, but it was too late. Of course, I could have been watching the shoulder of the road more carefully. I could have been going a little slower. I could have been thinking about my driving and not everything else under the sun. So I told myself.

As I pulled the deer off the road, gasping its last breaths, I felt sorry for the animal. It was innocent and didn't deserve this end. I felt angry that there are so many deer and that they are such a hazard. I felt irritated that now, my truck will sit in the shop and I'll have to pay the deductible.

Then I thought about another accident that has gripped our lives here in Custer for several months. How, in the twinkling of an eye, the lives of two families were forever changed: one because of severe injury, the other because of overwhelming sadness, concern for the injured, and legal issues. Two wonderful families. Two families we in Custer love. I thought: it could have happened to any of us! This is the kind of world we live in, even a few days after Christmas.

The good news is that God is with us in this world. And God continues to be present in and through us, as we have seen in so many ways since this accident, in the outpouring of love to both of these families. This is how God works, just the way God worked on that first Christmas night, when a child was born to a poor and frightened couple in the stable, because there was no room for them in the inn. Amen.