

“COLLATERAL DAMAGE”

First Sunday after Christmas/The Holy Innocents, Martyrs
December 28, 2025
Zion Lutheran Church
Fort Wayne, Indiana

TEXT:

Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old and under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men.

Matthew 2:16 (ESV)

I first heard the expression “collateral damage” during the first Gulf War back in the early 1990s. It was used to describe the deaths and injuries of civilians that were caused unintentionally in the course of executing the war. Military planning and strategy takes “collateral damage” into consideration. Civilians are never deliberately targeted (at least not by us) but those who are managing the conflict will, from time to time, conclude that the objective to be gained outweighs the civilian casualties that will likely result in the course of pursuing that objective. In recent years the term “collateral damage” has come to be used to describe any unintended consequences of a person’s intentional actions. For example, if a person is intent on advancing in business and becomes obsessed with that objective, he literally will not let anyone or anything stand in his way. He may not intend to do harm to a competitor’s reputation or to engage in any dishonest practices, but if that’s what it takes for him to achieve his goal, that’s what he will do.

One of the most atrocious examples of “collateral damage” in recorded history is described in the Gospel for this morning. It wasn’t really the number of children who were killed that makes this act so horrendous (Bethlehem was, after all, only a small town); it was the cruelty of slaughtering innocent children as their grieving and helpless mothers looked on. But such cruelty was nothing new to King Herod. After all, he had had his wife and at least two of his sons killed because he saw them as threats to his power and ambition. He also gave an order (that was never carried out) that when he died a number of highly respected Jews in Jerusalem were to be executed, just to make sure that there would be grieving in the holy city of the Jews at the time of his death. This is the sort of character that we are dealing with here. But that monster inside of him lurks inside of us as well. We too, at times, are ruled by ambition and jealousy. So that we might not fall victim to that, becoming “collateral damage” spiritually, we will examine Matthew’s inspired words before us this morning with an eye for man’s cruelty and God’s mercy.

Human cruelty is fueled by jealousy and selfishness. Herod, whose Jewish ancestry was questionable at best, was merely a puppet of the Roman empire. He was allowed to have the title “King of the Jews” by the Romans, but in reality he was no more a king than Pontius Pilate was. As a matter fact, between the time of Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem and His civil trial before Pilate, the position that Herod had held was divided among three of his sons and was subsequently eliminated and replaced by the Romans with the position of procurator (or governor). Herod had received the title and position of “King of the Jews” by selling out the people who he claimed as his own in order to cooperate with their oppressors. But he didn’t do it out of any loyalty to Rome; he did it out of pure selfishness and self-promotion. It is no wonder, then, that such a self-centered tyrant as Herod would have no problem of conscience in eliminating anyone, no matter how harmless he may be, who is called “King of the Jews” (*Matthew 2:2*), which is precisely what the wise men had called Jesus.

Can we honestly say that things are any different in our day? Abortion and euthanasia are accepted in our culture and in some cases are legal. The lives of infants and elderly people who are disabled are destroyed for no other reason than that they are an inconvenience or an embarrassment to others. Their lives may be taken by an injection with a needle rather than by a thrust with a sword, but the results are just as brutal. And so are the motives. This becomes clear when you consider the fact that, in many states, a pregnant woman can legally choose to end her child’s life by abortion, but if that woman wants her child and miscarries in an automobile accident, the guilty driver is charged with negligent homicide. On the other end of life it all seems to boil down to dollars and cents—to the cost of caring for someone who, in the opinion of those who are charged to make decisions regarding that person, is no longer a contributing member of society. No matter who we may be, it seems that it all has to be about me—what I want—what I “need” to continue living my life comfortably in the way that I want to live it.

But despite man’s cruelty, God is merciful. Herod’s plot to destroy the “King of the Jews” (*Matthew 2:2*) did not succeed. Jesus survived—not so that He could escape suffering and death but so that He could die the death that He was intended to die—the death that gives us life. God’s plan from the very beginning—the plan first promised in Eden—was that a Descendant of the woman would destroy the deceiver and reverse the damage that he had done to God’s creation. God’s plan, as revealed in the prophets and in the bloody animal sacrifices that He had instituted, was that human sin could be atoned for only by the shedding of innocent blood—the blood of “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (*John 1:29*). So great is God’s love for His fallen creatures that He

carefully planned and carried out the once-for-all blood sacrifice that would atone for all the sin of all humanity for all time.

“When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of woman, born under the Law, to redeem those who were under the Law, so that we might receive adoption as sons” (*Galatians 4:4, 5*). The covenant of grace and forgiveness that God made with Adam and Eve in the garden and repeated through the centuries came to fulfillment in the event that we now know as Christmas. God took matters into His own hands, keeping His promise to do for us helpless and hopeless sinners what we could never do for ourselves. In Christ He perfectly met the demands of His own Law, living the perfect life in our place. Not only that, but He also paid the penalty that you and I and every other sinner who ever lived have earned for ourselves: He made the perfect sacrifice of innocent blood when He, the Innocent One, suffered and died on the cross at the hands of the very people that He came to save, as the apostle Peter tells us in his First Letter: “Christ … suffered once for sins, the Righteous for the unrighteous, that He might bring us to God” (*1 Peter 3:18*). Because Jesus was spared from the rage of King Herod, He was able to endure, for you and for me, the righteous wrath of God against sin, so that we might be reconciled to God.

We honor the innocents of Bethlehem today because they were the first martyrs of the New Testament—the first to give up their lives for the sake of Christ and His Gospel. Their life was short and their death was violent, but they played a tremendous role in God’s great drama of salvation. Like John the Baptist before them, they decreased so that Christ might increase. This is the calling of all who belong to Him (including us), and it comes with great blessing, as Jesus Himself assures us, saying: “Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the Gospel’s will save it” (*Mark 8:35*).

Amen.

May the true Light which enlightens everyone, which has come into the world, shining brightly in the darkness, be your very life. And may the Word become flesh, Jesus Christ Himself, continue to make known to you His redeeming grace and truth now and always. He who calls you is faithful, and He will do it. Amen.