

12-28-25 Sermon: “Keep Dreaming” – Matthew 2:13-23

The last few days, I have been indulging in one of my favorite guilty pleasures at this time of year – kitschy Christmas movies.

I’ve got my favorites – *Elf*, *A Muppet Christmas Carol*, *Charlie Brown Christmas*, the *Grinch*... But then, I love to go see what new movies the streaming services have cooked up.

Sometimes, these straight-to-Netflix Christmas films are “hits,” and that can be fun to watch. But more often, they are “misses” – and that, my friends, is *way* more entertaining!

Some recent favorites in the “miss the mark” category include *Red One*, where Santa Claus is kidnapped by an evil witch in cahoots with Krampus the Christmas monster, and Dwayne “the Rock” Johnson must find him and bring him back to the North Pole.

Or this year’s *Oh. What. Fun.*, in which a Texas mom of adult children feels irrelevant and unappreciated, so she runs away to California on Christmas Eve to join a daytime TV special.

But the winner has to be *Hot Frosty*, in which a grieving widow accidentally brings a snowman to life as some hunky miracle-man and proceeds to fall in love with him.

It’s amazing to me that Hollywood can make this many absolutely absurd movies about Christmas. But there is something intoxicating about being lulled into the magic of the Christmas season. About escaping into a world where real life – and its real problems – don’t exist.

This morning’s gospel reading does not permit that kind of escapism. The baby in the manger was born just a few days ago, and already we are yanked from our holiday glow and thrown back into the world of murderous tyrants and grieving parents.

This story is known as the Massacre of the Innocents, and it is exactly that. King Herod feels threatened by the child born King of the Jews. So he asks the wise men to report back on where the child is born. When they don’t, he flies into a rage and kills all the baby boys born in Bethlehem. But an angel warns Joseph in a dream, so he, Mary, and the child escape as refugees to Egypt.

It’s a horrifying story. It breaks our hearts and turns our stomachs – and well it should. This is a story of evil personified – a greedy tyrant killing innocent children because his power is threatened. At the end of the story, the baby Jesus is safe, but we are left feeling rather...hopeless.

You know, believe it or not, these days I find myself feeling kinda grateful that Matthew chose to include this part in his Christmas story. Because this story sounds like real life.

We’ve heard the Christmas story so many times that it can start to feel...enchanted, like those Netflix Christmas specials. A virgin gives birth. Wise men follow a star. Angels fill the night sky and sing songs of peace while a baby sleeps in a manger. Christmas glows like a holy story, almost too beautiful and magical to touch.

But the story of King Herod and his rampage in Bethlehem sounds like the news we hear every day. We recognize King Herod; from generation to generation, we have seen his face before. Insecure rulers sending raids into the homes of innocent people. Children torn from their families. Mothers weeping in the streets.

The Massacre of the Innocents is a horrible story – and it is a very real one. And *that* is where I find the hope in this story. Because if Jesus can be born into a world with this kind of death and destruction, then maybe he can be born in our current world, too.

Whether we like it or not, King Herod is a part of the Christmas story. As much as the shepherds, the wise men, the angels. Christmas is about Incarnation – the Word becoming Flesh – God choosing to live among us as a vulnerable human baby.

Incarnation means that God feels our pain, that God bears witness when God's people suffer. And we who follow Jesus are called to do the same – to take this holy practice of incarnation seriously. Which means that when evil rears its ugly head in the King Herods of our world, we cannot bury our own heads in the sand – or in Netflix Christmas movies. We, too, are called to practice incarnation – to witness the suffering of our fellow human beings and to do something about it.

But what? In a world where King Herod reigns supreme, what could *we* possible do to make things better?

I find the answer in Joseph.

Joseph is a fascinating character in the Christmas story. When he and Mary are newly engaged, an angel appears to Joseph in a dream and says, “Joseph, your fiancé Mary is pregnant, but don't be afraid to take her as your wife. The child she is carrying comes from the Holy Spirit, and he will save your people from their sins. He shall be called Emmanuel – God-with-us.”

Joseph wakes from the dream, and to everyone's surprise – perhaps to Joseph's as well – he does what the angel says. He marries Mary and raises the child as his own. He trusts his dream – trusts God – and acts accordingly.

And I can't help but wonder if Joseph's willingness to trust and act on this first dream is what prepares him to act on the dreams in this morning's reading – dreams with much higher stakes. Dreams that send his family away as refugees to Egypt, and then dreams that bring them safely back home.

If there is any hope, any instruction for the Christian life in this story, I believe it comes from Joseph. Because Joseph teaches us to listen to our dreams.

Like many of you, I dream of a day that is better than this one, a world that kinder, more just, and more compassionate than the world we live in. Our history is full of dreamers, of prophets who have called upon us to be more loving and more faithful as a people than we are today.

Joseph teaches us to take those dreams seriously. To believe that our visions of a better future come from God. Joseph teaches us to let our dreams guide our behavior, to wake up from our dreaming and take action, to turn our dreams into reality.

In a world where Herod is still in charge, Joseph teaches us to be a people who do not give up on dreaming dreams.

Because the thing about this story is that Herod dies at the end.

The death and destruction that he causes are real, and we cannot turn away from the reality of evil in our world. But we *can* trust in God's promise that evil will not reign forever.

Herod has his day, but Herod's day will end. We who witness to Christ's death and resurrection know how the story ends. God wins. Love wins. Goodness is stronger than evil.

So friends, let us, be the people who bear God's incarnate love to the world in the meantime. Let us be the people who dream the dreams of the world that God is bringing into being. And let us be the ones who make those dreams reality. Amen.