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Sermon Title: "The Dark Side of Christmas"
Scripture: Matthew 2:11-16
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

Matthew 2:11-16

On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road. Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.' Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.' When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men

Nineteen eighty-nine was a miraculous year for freedom in the world. The Berlin Wall crumbled. Communism fell by the wayside in Hungary and Romania. "Solidarity" would soon set Poland free. And in Czechoslovakia, Vaclav Havel's "Velvet Revolution" was overthrowing 40 years of terror with a nonviolent movement led by Christians, rock 'n' roll bands, students, playwrights, and just plain Janes and Joes who wanted to be free.

On one of the biggest days of the overthrow, my dear friend Father Tomáš Halík was in Rome with Pope John Paul II, preparing for truly, truly a new day, a new Christlike Church to be ready for freedom. Halík flew back to Prague realizing—and I quote from his book,—“realizing the coming Christmas would be the first truly free Christmas of our lives.” *The first truly free Christmas of our lives.* (Halík, Tomáš. *From the Underground Church to Freedom.* Notre Dame Press, 2019. p. 177.)

We can't imagine saying such a thing; our freedoms are so extensive, so freewheeling, so legendary. But I suggest to you in 50 percent, maybe 60 percent of the world, a "truly free Christmas" won't be happening. As our Scripture lesson makes clear, the first Christmas was not free at all.

Our Bible story for today is in two parts. Really, two sides of the same coin. The story of the Wise Men, Part I and Part II; the Good News Scripture *and* the Bad News Scripture. This is one of the truly horrible stories in the Bible. It even has a horrible name, "The Slaughter of the Innocents." This is the ugly side of Christmas. Hide the children, cover their ears, get the smelling salts.

The story is overlooked, underplayed, and makes everybody uncomfortable. In addition to the horrors of the story, it's also about the intersection of faith and politics, the clash of religion and government, the abuse of power at the top . . . And this was 2,000 years ago! Two thousand years later, now, the names change, the game remains the same.

Today, we're going to look at the Bible story, the good and the bad; and in the middle, I'll tell you about my friend, Father Tomáš Halík. And maybe we'll take home a lesson or two.

Mostly, Christmas is a lovely little story. You know it by heart. An angel tells Mary she's going to have a very special baby. Mary is fine with it; her husband, Joseph, is fine with it. An oppressive Roman government forces everybody in Israel to return to their hometown, which puts Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem, where Jesus is born in a stable. "No room in the inn," they are told. Shepherds, guided by angels, come to see. The Wise Men, guided by a wandering star, come to see and bring gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Fit for a king.

Altogether we have angels, shepherds, Wise Men, a star, a manger, and a stable. "The Holy Family." A miracle for the ages. All true. But somebody's nose is always out of joint. There is always somebody looking on critically, selfishly, thinking, "What's in it for me?"

You'll remember our first Scripture today. The Wise Men, foreign astronomers from another land, followed a mysterious star all the way to Jerusalem. They interpreted the star as a sure sign that God was doing something extraordinary, the birth of a new king for the Jews. So the Wise Men did the obvious. They went to the king's palace and asked innocently, "Where is this baby who will be King of the Jews?" Well, the palace already had a King of the Jews, Herod. And he was not pleased to hear about the birth of a usurper, a competitor. But he was smart. He called in his experts. They found a Bible verse that pointed to Bethlehem, and Herod sent the Wise Men on their way with one simple favor to ask: "When you find that baby, come back and tell me, so I can go there and worship." Sure.

The Wise Men get back on their camels, travel eight or 10 miles to Bethlehem, find the Holy Family, present their gifts, and worship, revere, honor this baby, Jesus, lying in a manger.

So far, so good. G-rated. We include all this in our Christmas pageant, little kids dressed up as "We Three Kings," carrying boxes of precious oils and gems, following the star, finding the Baby Jesus. Love it! If this were Broadway, we'd have a 15-minute intermission, knowing Act II is going to upset the plot a whole lot.

O.K., here's Act II. After the Wise Men find the Holy Family, give their gifts, show their respect, "they are warned in a dream not to go back to Herod." (Matthew 2:12) Joseph also has a dream, warning him to grab his family and escape to Egypt. (vs. 13) "When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Wise Men, he was furious," vs. 16 tells us, "and he orders his soldiers to go to Bethlehem and neighboring towns to kill every baby boy under the age of 2." Herod wasn't taking any chances. He was not going to tolerate any resistance, any opposition, any threat to his one-man rule.

Some years ago Alida and I were at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, and stood transfixed by a painting by Giovanni Angelo Del Maino in 1520. It depicts that awful genocide, soldiers delighting in terror, mothers screaming in anguish, the innocents being slaughtered to enhance the ego and vanity of one man. I sat down and wrote this poem in one try. Most poems I work on for a year or two. This was a visceral reaction to the painting of today's "Bad News Scripture."

**"The Slaughter of the Innocents.
(Exodus 1:15-16, 22; Matthew 2:16-18)**

*The slaughter of the innocents
makes no sense
in this story or any other
the genocide
of sister or brother
one never a husband
one never a bride
 Thus is the story untold
 or mistold
 or endlessly told
 of what we did to them
 and they to us
 in days of old.
At some King's behest*

*or divine request
soldiers take swords
to infant heads
and mothers' breast
just another holocaust
the collateral damage
of royal words
misunderstood
from some dimestore Pharaoh
straight from hell
to tear the heart
out of a people's soul*

Now, let me tell you about my friend and his book. I talk about him a lot in my own book, *Church*, and he's been featured in a bunch of my sermons. Here I'll give you a brief personal background, some biography, tell you why you must read this book, and what all this means for us.

The first time I went to Prague was in 2005, using sabbatical time to write a book of religious poetry. I didn't know anything about the Czech Republic, nothing. I had meager experience of Europe. All I heard was that Christianity was dead in Europe and that the Czech Republic was the deadest of all, the most atheists, the most anti-Church.

One Sunday night I'm crossing the famous Charles Bridge and see this huge overflow crowd facing into a packed Church. I pushed my way in, not a seat anywhere. I was the oldest person there by 30 years. End of story.

I returned to America, and one day there's a *New York Times* article about some Czech Catholic priest doing amazing work and cited his books. It was Father Tomáš Halík. One of his books was revolutionary, daring Christians to see atheists and agnostics in a new light.

He opened up for me a whole new way of thinking about the world in which we live, our times, when fewer people come to Church, and more claim there is no God, and even more, just don't care. His optimism fueled my optimism.

The next year I took Alida to Prague and to that Church, once again packed to the gills. To my surprise, the priest was Father Tomáš Halík. As soon as we left the Church, Alida tracked down his email, put me in touch, and two days later I met him for the first time. Since then, we've met many times, his thoughts and ideas and books shaping my faith, my life, and our ministry.

Our Faith/Art program in the summer that focuses on religious art in the sanctuary, our encouragement of young musicians and singers, our Christ-centered openness to all people, our desire to impact daily life in the world around us, and our unbridled optimism, no matter how bleak the day—that's Father Halík, that's Greenfield Hill Church. All because every time I went to his Church, you could tell, something was going on there, something good.

An ancient Czech Church, packed for a Sunday evening service, packed for a Tuesday night service, every seat taken; people kneeling on the stone floors beside the pews, people lined up out to the sidewalk; young people, crossing themselves, taking Communion, kneeling for prayer; people lining up afterward to speak to him privately and in groups for two and three hours after Church.

Over the years, he's told me pieces of his life story, and I've waited not so patiently for his autobiography to be translated into English by the University of Notre Dame. And now it's here, and now I've read it, and now I'm pushing it, and now I'm telling you it's one of the most important books I've ever read, and now I'm preaching about it. And now we're planning an after-Church discussion devoted to it in January. It's that important.

Here's a brief summary: Father Halík was born into the former Czechoslovakia just after World War II. Czechoslovakia had been an afterthought in the Austro-Hungarian Empire for 400 years. After World War I, they gained independence for 20 years. When Nazi Germany invaded, the Western world capitulated, turned away, and they were ruled ruthlessly by the Nazis. That betrayal led them to vote in the Communists after World War II. By the time Father Halík was a child, the Communists were betraying the people: full-blown oppression, massive surveillance, huge secret police, anti-Christianity, anti-West, pro-Stalin, pro-Soviet Union. Halík's parents were dissidents, and he grew up with an intellectual curiosity and a yearning for freedom that both intellect and curiosity require.

Raised without religion, he had an immense interest, an immense yearning to know more, to know deeper, deeper, and deeper still. And true to his character, if the Communists said there was no God, *and* don't go to Church, he was even more determined to go to Church *and* find God. He did.

Encouraged by local priests, he began secret studies to become a secret priest. A psychologist by day, with a special heart for alcoholics, he was a priestly Clark Kent, using every free moment to help every freedom-loving person, underground Christians, dissident writers and artists, beleaguered workers, everyone hounded and trailed and threatened by the whole atmosphere of secret police, paid snitches, and daily dread.

As his Christian faith deepened, and his Christian experience deepened, he and other clandestine clergy began to prepare Christianity for the end of Communism. He prayed for it, yes. But he was diligent to prepare for what it would mean to be a Christian and a Czech, when the Czech "Liberty Bell" rang, and freedom shook off its shackles. With Big Brother no longer over your shoulder, with the State and the Party, *the Party*, no longer ordering your daily life, with the individual now truly free . . . what would they be?

Czechoslovakia has a 600-year history of Christians despising other Christians, despising, persecuting, killing one another. Six hundred years. They had 50 years of Nazi-Communist iron control with death camps and gulags and torture cells, turning neighbor against neighbor. Killing fields of the soul. Halík knew that all the people who suffered for freedom, who sacrificed for freedom, who prayed and yearned and died for freedom didn't sacrifice, suffer, or die for the Christian Church to go back to what it used to be: divisive, intolerant, selfish, arrogant.

I'll link one story for you, then back to the Bible and Christmas.

When my friend Tomáš was 20 years old, a fellow student, a young Protestant named Jan Palach, burned himself alive to protest Communism. There is a simple, powerful memorial to him on the main boulevard, a sort of wooden cross, melted into the sidewalk. Alida and I visit it every time we're there, and weep. My son and I found his grave, and we went there to pray, and weep. It is clear from Halík's autobiography that this event changed the course of his life. He organized a Requiem Mass for Jan, and he contemplated the note the boy left behind. The note said Jan was "Torch #1," implying that others would follow. That night, that sacrifice put Halík steadfastly on the path to conversion, to Christian faith, to becoming a priest, to taking a stand.

Several years later, he was ordained secretly in East Germany. He remembers seeing a banner at the train station in Erfurt with a quote from Lenin. "Sparks create flames." Halík was immediately struck by that favorite phrase of Lenin's Communism: "Sparks create flames." He immediately saw the parallel to his choice to become a priest. He was about to put his life on the line. Or, in Old Testament language, he was offering himself on the altar of God. He was willing to be Jan Palach's "Torch #2." He embarked on a secret priesthood that risked everything for the joy of serving God, working for freedom, and preparing his nation and Church for the future.

Which brings us back to today's Bible story. Wise men. King Herod. Abuse of power. The slaughter of the innocents. That world. And our world. The times of that first Christmas. The times of our present Christmas.

No matter your politics, you recognize that there are Herods all over the place, little Herods and big Herods, near and far. Wherever leaders think it's natural to turn neighbor against neighbor. Wherever leaders co-opt religion to serve the state. Wherever leaders silence voices other than their own. Wherever leaders think the "royal we" means them, not us. Wherever leaders fear your thoughts, your freedom. Wherever leaders mock the wise, oppress the poor, and ridicule faith; wherever leaders won't distinguish soldiers from killers; wherever the innocent are a threat, that's where Herod still reigns.

Into such a world Jesus was born. Into such a world Tomáš Halík was born. What Jesus brought was the gift of miracle and of wonder and of God's presence in the midst of earth's worst. Angel songs and Virgin birth and wandering star and hopeful parents and believing shepherds and seeking Wise Men all together in a homeless shelter of a stable.

What Tomáš Halík brought was the reality that you and I can enter into that world of miracle and wonder and still make a difference. Grit. Faith. Courage. Prayer. They are our tools for defeating whatever would control us.

A few years ago, my friend Father Halík was awarded the highest award in religion, The Templeton Prize. As he was presented the various gifts that go with the prize, among them was a beautifully calligraphed citation, his name prominent and embossed. And along the sides are several symbols. The presenter pointed to one in particular, a hammer and a sickle, a broken hammer and a broken sickle, symbolizing Halík's lifelong ministry to end tyranny, to restore freedom, to seek truths.

Christmases past and present have their horrors. Christmases past and present have their heroes. Christmases past and present have their hopes. Now it's our time to be the heroes and the hopes.

Our final hymn today is "My Life Flows On in Endless Song," No. 619, a hymn that shares that conviction:

*My life flows on in endless song;
above earth's lamentation,
I hear the clear, though far off hymn
that hails a new creation.*

*[Refrain:] No storm can shake my inmost calm
while to that Rock I'm clinging.
Since love is Lord of heav'n and earth,
how can I keep from singing?*

*Through all the tumult and the strife,
I hear the music ringing.
It finds an echo in my soul.
How can I keep from singing? [Refrain]*

*What though my joys and comforts die?
I know my Savior liveth.
What though the darkness gather round?
Songs in the night he giveth. [Refrain]*

*The peace of Christ makes fresh my heart,
a fountain ever springing!
All things are mine since I am his!
How can I keep from singing? [Refrain]*