

The readings for the Feast of the Holy Innocents are not exactly festive, despite coming just three days into the Christmas season. The story from Matthew comes right on the heels of the nativity story. The Christchild has been born and magi have given their gifts. And then the Angel Gabriel visits Joseph for the second time, warning him to take his family to Egypt. And then we learn why Gabriel's advice was necessary.

The details are grim. So grim that maybe this is the kind of feast day for people who are a little more settled in their faith—perhaps not the day we would invite unchurched friends to join us. But then again, maybe it's perfect for that. Maybe it's perfect because this is a feast day that trusts the Christian faith to respond to life's most disturbing questions, like the suffering of innocent children. Maybe there's something we can offer to people about the way that God loves and acts regardless of the way that humans often act.

The lectionary readings for the feast of the Holy Innocents speak to the mystery of suffering. Rachel's voice is heard in Ramah, weeping for her children, crying for an end to her descendants' sufferings and exiles following the destruction by the Babylonians of the First Temple in ancient Jerusalem. And God promised Rachel that there was hope for her future.

Children are *still* dying in the Holy Land because of politics and fear, and recent events make it likely that the numbers will rise. From 2000 to 2013, Israelis killed 1,518 Palestinian children – that's an average of one Palestinian child every three days on average. And from 2000 to 2004, Palestinians killed more than 100 Israeli children.

Here in the States, homicide was the third leading cause of death for children ages one to four in 2014 and the fourth leading cause of death for children ages five to nine. Around the globe, from Aleppo to Marysville, it seems the news is filled with reasons to weep and mourn for our children.

But there in the Revelation to John is the word that we can take to aching hearts. "See, the home of God is among mortals." John's vision is of a new Jerusalem coming from heaven to earth, so that God will dwell with us. In Christ, death is no longer the final word. Hope is the final word.

In one of the last books that she published before she died, Episcopalian Madeleine L'Engle wrote this:

"This is no time for a child to be born,  
With the Earth betrayed by war and hate  
And a comet slashing the sky to warn  
That time runs out and the sun burns late.

“That was no time for a child to be born  
In a land in the crushing grip of Rome  
Honor and truth were trampled by scorn --  
Yet here did the Saviour make his home.

“When is the time of love to be born?  
The inn is full on planet earth,  
And by a comet the sky is torn --  
Yet Love still takes the risk of birth.<sup>1</sup>”

Last Sunday, we celebrated the love of God that took the risk to be born once as the Christ-child and that still takes the risk to be embodied in each of us. For us to take that risk seriously requires that we see the Christ-child in our human context – to recall his birth in a country occupied by foreign invaders, laid in a bed of straw by his mother, still just a young girl. We can see all that clearly, and yet despite all the instability, we can find ways to celebrate joyfully.

God's love for humanity and presence in our lives often seem paradoxical. The Feast of the Holy Innocents brings out the “notwithstanding” or the “nevertheless” nature of the Christmas season when Love still takes the risk of birth. This is the season when we encounter God's unlikely presence in the vulnerability of a tiny child, and discovering God's presence there inspires us to begin anew the labor and the gift of giving birth to hope, love, joy and peace. We learn to give these to others “anyway” or “despite” the many horrors that humans visit upon each other. Some of us even give birth to and nurture hope and love and joy and peace for other *specifically because* of the inhumanity that we are all capable of.

These are the spiritually mature acts of people who know first-hand our universal and fundamental dependency on God—people who have cried out and found God's nearness in their most vulnerable moments of crushing grief or painful failure. We do not live in a peaceful snow-globe; we live in a world where children die and mothers and fathers grieve—not just occasionally, but every day, not just in hospitals but on our city streets.

That is the hard reality of humankind. Each of us in our own way must confront the most brutal facts of our current reality, whatever those may be. Otherwise, we are left only with naïve optimism and the assumption that someone, somehow will make it better. But optimism is a passive virtue that requires no courage. Optimism is only slightly more useful than pessimism and it provides even less shielding in the face of tragedy.

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<sup>1</sup> L'Engle, Madeleine, and Luci Shaw. Wintersong: Christmas Readings. Vancouver, British Columbia: Regent College Publishing, 2003.

Hope, on the other hand, is the active trust that we can work together with God to make things better. Between “optimism” and “hope” lies all the difference in the world. Jeremiah, Rachel, the psalmist and John of Patmos, the author of Revelation, were not optimists. They saw catastrophe, but every one of them was an agent of hope *anyway—regardless* of the devastation.

Let me leave you with the words of one of my favorite authors, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks: “By discovering the God who created the universe in love,” he says, “we become practitioners of hope. We’ve seen too much to be optimists. You don’t need to be an optimist to have hope. Religious faith is not ‘positive thinking.’ It is not naïve optimism. It is not a matter of seeing the world as we would like it to be, and then believing that mere wishing or praying will make it so. God never promised that the world would get better of its own accord.

“Faith means seeing the world exactly as it is and yet not giving up the belief that it could be otherwise, if we are ready to act with others to make it so. Faith is realism that has been touched by hope. And hope has the power to transform the world.<sup>2</sup>”

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<sup>2</sup> Sacks, Jonathan. “*Optimism Is All Very Good, but It Takes Courage to Hope.*” May 2010.