

Christmas 1A – Mt 2:13-23

1. Christmastime is so short, not only does time go quickly with all of the celebrations and festivities but the actual Church season is short.
 - a. Today is the first Sunday of Christmas as well as New Year's Day - next week we'll be in the Epiphany season – Christmas has already been lost in the shuffle
 - i. It seems we've only just begun to ponder the gift of "God with us" in the birth of Christ and we're already moving on.
 - ii. We only get to enjoy some of the best known and loved hymnody for a very brief time.
 - b. Christmas is also such a time of joy and celebration, but today's lessons appear to be a stark contrast with the joy the season.
 - i. We are reminded that we live in a tough world, a world antithetical to God and His Word – the Church and her people tread the path of the cross in their earthly pilgrimage
 - ii. The Devil, the World, and our sinful flesh – the unholy trinity as we know them will stop at nothing to do away with God's Word
 - c. When you look to the new year ahead is it marked with optimism or fear?
 - i. Yes, we can hope for a better year than last year – health wise, financially, etc but do we have any assurance that it will be better or just a desire?
 - ii. The world appears to be ever-increasingly arrayed against the church, no longer friendly to the values we hold or the faith we profess.
 - iii. Earlier this month a woman was arrested in the UK for praying silently outside of a closed abortion clinic and was charged with "intimidation" ...
 - iv. But as we'll see in our readings God preserves His Promise even through desperate, evil situations
2. Following God has always had real consequences – consequences we've never dealt with in America, but may be coming if what's happening in the UK is any indication
 - a. We see that in our NT lesson and the Gospel
 - i. In the NT reading, we see St. Stephen the first martyr of the Church – Dec 26 happens to be the Feast of St. Stephen in the church
 - ii. In the Gospel Herod stops at nothing even killing all the infants in Bethlehem to destroy a rival claimant to the throne
 - iii. Yet through all of these tribulations God's purpose is served and His Kingdom advanced as God preserves His Promise
 - b. First, let's look at our Gospel lesson, and see that Satan will strike even at the Son of God if he can in order to derail salvation
 - i. While Scripture doesn't say that Herod was acting at the behest of Satan, anyone or anything that seeks to hinder God's plans in the world is of the devil
 - ii. Who knows what it would have meant for our salvation if Satan could have succeeded in killing the infant Jesus?

- c. But when God purposes to do something, His plans won't be undone by a mere creature even Satan.
 - i. In a reversal of the OT exodus, He preserved His Son and His family by sending them to Egypt.
 - ii. Just as He delivered Israel OUT of Egypt in the OT, He used them once again to protect His Son, **"Out of Egypt I called my son."** (Mt 2:15)
 - iii. God preserved His promise of salvation despite a king murdering his people to stop it.
- d. Then when we look at the NT reading, it may be hard at first to see where God preserved His promise; it appears to be a complete loss, but it wasn't
 - i. First, Stephen preached the Word of God, that reveals us for the hard-hearted sinners that we are, **"You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you..."** (Acts 7:51)
 - ii. There's only one of two reactions to the preaching of God's Word – either repentance when we recognize our sin and seek forgiveness or self-righteous denial and rage against the condemnation as we see here
 - iii. Yet even in the face of death Stephen was preserved, he feared no ill, he said **"Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."** (Acts 7:56)
 - iv. And as a result of his stoning Acts tells us that the church grew because, **"there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria"** (Acts 8:1) – the Gospel spread, God preserved His promise!
- 3. God uses all circumstances to advance His kingdom despite the rage and scorn of Satan
 - a. As we begin a new year it may look grim in our world today – the Church looks small and outnumbered, fighting against the tide of the times
 - i. This is part of what we call the Theology of the Cross – it is how God works
 - ii. He uses the least likely human means to advance His Kingdom as Paul says in I Cor, **"God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God."** (I Cor 1:28)
 - iii. No human would think to use the cross as an instrument of victory, **"For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise..."** (I Cor 1:18-19)
 - iv. Yet, by the sacrifice of our Lord on the cross the sins of all mankind have been forgiven, the powers of hell overcome, God went before us to the cross to provide our path to heaven through faith!
 - b. Just as our Lord demonstrated His glory and power through the cross so also the Church makes her way through the world by the way of the cross

- i. The Lord told His apostles the night before He was crucified, **“If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you.”** (Jn 15:18)
 - ii. Though the world be arrayed against her, and it seems that our culture is less and less tolerant of the Church every year, God preserves us
 - iii. That goes for you here at Pinnacle as we face significant challenges to our congregation this year
 - iv. God has not abandoned you, He still has a plan and purpose for you – put the Gospel at the center of all you do and God will preserve His promise maybe not in the way you think but He will!
- c. That’s because the message of Christmas is still ours through every event whether good or ill – Emmanuel, God is with us especially through trials
 - i. The Church in Acts grew despite the death of martyrs like Stephen
 - ii. As Paul tells us in Romans, **“What then shall we say to these things? (persecution and suffering of the church) If God is for us, who can be against us?”** (Rom 8:31)
 - iii. That even in the midst of our troubles we KNOW that God will never leave us or forsake us
 - iv. Even death is no longer an enemy, it works to our benefit because we gain heaven, as Scripture tells us, **“But, as it is written, “...no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him.”** (I Cor 2:9)
- d. We aren’t promised an easy path in our earthly pilgrimage, faith ISN’T a magical shield of protection from earthly troubles
 - i. We ARE promised strength to endure and patience to hang on because what awaits us far surpasses anything we might suffer here.
 - ii. That is the gift of Christmas “God with us”, God preserves His promise and His people.