

WEEKLY DEVOTION – Tuesday, December 19, 2023
Pastor Bruce Kischnick, Grace Lutheran Church, New Albany, IN

“Every Christmas may not be Merry”

READING: Matthew 2:13-18 – When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. “Get up,” he said, “take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.” So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet, “Out of Egypt I called my son.” When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: “A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.”

We hear “Merry Christmas!” a lot this time of year. We hear it on TV advertisements. We hear it in stores and restaurants. We get Christmas advertising, Christmas cards, and even our neighbors say it. We, in turn, do the same. There must be 20 or 30 popular Christmas songs that wish us a “Merry Christmas”. And there’s nothing wrong with that. We have cause to be merry because of the joy that radiates through our readings, hymns, and celebrations because, “Unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given.” That joy should make us merry.

But we should also be aware that all around us are people for whom Christmas will in no way be merry. They are mourning the death of a spouse, parent, child, or loved one without whom this Christmas will not be merry. A hole has appeared in their lives that cannot readily or easily be absorbed. The memories of prior Christmases will be painful this time around. Their loneliness, their pain, their grief are all so fresh and sharp that Christmas celebrations will be muted, if observed at all.

For other people, Christmas is a season of quiet desperation. They are struggling just to put food on their table and gas in their car. There’s little or nothing extra with which to buy gifts for children or loved ones. They may be tempted to go deep into debt to give the kids the Christmas they feel they must give them if they’re to be good parents. They see other parents buying expensive gifts for their children and feel the need to “keep up with the Joneses”. They spend money they don’t have and can’t afford, knowing this will come back to bite them in January.

For others, Christmas is a time of stress because of broken and damaged relationships that make it difficult to navigate get-togethers and family time. For those divorced and sharing child custody there are negotiations that have to be made to determine when and where the kids get to visit grandparents. In some families Christmas dinner can seem like a mine field.

One false step, and anger and bitterness leap up. There are families estranged from one another. Christmas goes by without a word from a grown child or an absentee father. Children receive no gift, or worse, no love and affection from a parent or grandparent. It just doesn't happen.

The martyrdom of "The Innocents" certainly drives this point home. While Mary and Joseph took the child Jesus to safety in Egypt, the mothers in and around Bethlehem endured the horror of seeing their two-year-old and younger sons murdered before their eyes. While Mary nursed and dandled her son on her lap, those mothers wept and mourned, inconsolable. Then, as now, Christmas wasn't merry for everyone.

I guess that's why, the longer I'm in the ministry, the less I want to say, "Merry Christmas" to people. I'm all too aware of how hollow that can sound to someone overburdened with sorrows or difficulties. Christmas can't and won't ALWAYS be merry, even for you or me. But this I know: even if Christmas can't be merry, it can always be "BLESSED" – always!

Merriment is based on worldly circumstances and the vagaries of life. Blessing is based on a deeper and more permanent basis: what God has already done for us in the gift of his Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Life has its ups and downs, its joys and sorrows, its good times and bad. But the hope and the joy we have in the birth of the Christ child can be ours no matter what else is going on in our lives.

That's why, more and more, you'll hear me wish people a "Blessed Christmas". I mostly have no way of knowing whether theirs will be a "Merry Christmas" but if Christ Jesus is at the center of their lives, then I know their Christmas can be "Blessed". So what I say to you, I say to all, "Have a Blessed Christmas!" Amen.

PRAYER:

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

1) Since CHRISTMAS EVE falls on a Sunday this year, here is the service line-up:

- * One morning service at 10:00 AM
- * Christmas Eve – 5:00 PM * Christmas Eve – 11:00 PM
- * Christmas morning – 10:00 AM