

THE FIRST SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS

Isaiah 63:7-9; Psalm 148; Hebrews 2:10-18; Matthew 2:13-23

Eli Wiesel was a survivor of the concentration camp at Auschwitz. In the book *Night*, he tells of his experiences in the concentration camps. In one chapter of *Night* he tells of witnessing the hanging of three men. One of the three men was nothing but a boy. When they were hanged the two large men died instantly, but the boy, because of his light weight died slowly. The prisoners in Auschwitz were made to watch the execution. And through it all a man behind Eli Wiesel asked out loud, “Where is God now”? He was expressing frustration, and feeling that God had abandoned them. Here was a young man, a boy, who had risked his life to save other people. How could God let these Nazis torture him? They were God’s chosen people, and yet this was happening. Had God forgotten them? Where was God anyway?

And down through the ages other people have asked the same question. When faced with injustice and murder people ask, “Where is God now”? It is a cry of desperation from a troubled heart. When we witness horrible atrocities, we wonder how a loving God can allow such things to happen. We feel powerless in the face of such evil, and our only response is to look to God and cry out, “Where is God Now? Where are you”?

We are all familiar with the story of the Three Kings. Those wise men who follow a star to Bethlehem to worship the King of the Jews, Jesus Christ. But right on its heels is another story that

is tragic and disturbing. King Herod, in his evil love of power, plots to kill this baby born King of the Jews. At first he plans to use the wise men to find Jesus and murder him. But the wise men are warned by God in a dream not to tell Herod, but to go home another way.

When Herod realized he has been tricked, he ordered all the children, who are two years old or under, killed. He didn't conduct a house to house search to find the one baby he wanted dead. He didn't order all the boys killed. He ordered all the children killed.

But God warned Joseph in a dream, and Joseph fled to Egypt, thus fulfilling other prophecies. Jesus was spared from this attempt on his life. Jesus was destined to die, but this was not the right time. So God intervened, allowing Jesus to grow up and be revealed through his earthly ministry. The powers of evil tried to kill the Messiah before his time, but God miraculously intervened.

God intervenes to save the Messiah, while hundreds of other innocent children die. There should be a part of us that asks, "What about these children?" What about their parents and grandparents, their brothers and sisters? What about these suffering people? It's fine that God intervened to save one baby boy, but why didn't God intervene to save these hundreds of others. Where was God in this?

We are not the only people who have asked this question.

Christians through the ages have asked this same question, and arrived at different answers. The ancient Christians gave special honor to these children. This event was called the "slaughter of the innocents". And because these children had died while Jesus escaped, they reasoned that these children were, in a sense, the first Christian martyrs, and that they went straight to heaven, and

thus they have a special place in God's kingdom.

A more thoughtful approach is to argue that the death of these children is the necessary result of free will. God has blessed us with the free will to choose good or evil. Herod had free will.

He could have chosen to embrace Jesus, instead he chose to murder him. Herod could have tried to find Jesus, but instead he, of his own free, chose to slaughter hundreds of children.

God had given him that free will, and could not rightly take it away from him, or from us. God could not stop Herod from slaughtering hundreds without being ungracious, but God could intervene to spare that one special child, so that is what God did. So, where is God Now? Perhaps we have overlooked a very important part of this story that is, after all, about Jesus, Emmanuel - "God with us". Jesus is at the center of this story.

So where is God in the slaughter of the innocents. Well, God was right there, in the middle of it.

Eli Weisel came to the same conclusion in his concentration camp. As the man asked, "Where is God Now!" In his heart Eli responded, "He is there on the Gallows". Where was God in the Holocaust? One response is that God was in the concentration camps, experiencing the pain. God had given the Nazis free will, and they chose to use it to do evil. God could not steal that gift of free will away without going against his nature. God could also not just sit by while others suffered. So God suffered with them, and was present to comfort, and even to die.

God was, and is, where ever people are suffering. Isn't that what the Christmas story is all about. God, the Almighty, came into the midst of our suffering and pain to bring comfort and salvation, and to hang on a cross. Where is God now as thousands die in wars and of poverty. God is there with them. We often look for God in the beautiful and pure. We look for

God in decorated churches and fancy sanctuaries. And God is here, because God is everywhere. In the Christmas season we look for God in fancy decorations, gold and silver objects, decorative candles. But today's Bible reading tells us of another place to look.

If we want to find God, look for pain and suffering. If we really want to find out where God is, go to the slums, he is there. Go to the cancer wards; God is there. Go to the war torn parts of the world where children are being slaughtered, and we will find God there.

Oh, we won't see God at first, but through Christ and the Holy Spirit, God is there. And while we are there looking for God, why don't we lend a hand to bring some comfort and peace, then we will really see God.

When we come face to face with the evil of this world, and we ask ourselves where God is now, remember that God is "Emmanuel", God with us always and forever.

AMEN.