God is Not Yet Done
Matthew 2:13-23

On Thursday I returned from a trip to Northern Ireland. This was an educational trip, sponsored by the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, and led by the Telos Group, an organization that leads immersive trips into areas experiencing or recovering from conflict, with the goal of learning about peacemaking, reconciliation, and transformation.

The original plan was to visit Israel and Palestine. That plan obviously fell apart this fall as the region exploded into violence and hostility. So we went instead to another part of the world that has experienced the senselessness of violence, and is now trying to recover, even as division remains.

Even as we focused on the Troubles in Northern Ireland – the period of three decades from 1968-1998 marked by violence between Catholics and Protestants, Nationalists and Unionists – other conflicts were a regular part of our conversation. Throughout Northern Ireland were symbols and flags supporting either Israel or Palestine. One of the trip's leaders lives in Jerusalem. Another participant grew up in South Korea, and has spent a lifetime studying the conflict between the north and the south. A large number of participants were African-American, engaged in anti-racism work and reconciliation in the United States.

It was a good week. But it was a heavy week. All over the world, people have suffered at the hands of other people – people clutching at power and wealth, driven by pride and fear. It's too common a story. And has been since the dawn of time.

So while the Scripture passage we read today might seem like a bit of a hard turn after the comforts and coziness of Christmas…it also feels

remarkably unsurprising. Our world is all-too acquainted with Herods. All-too acquainted with senseless violence and grief.

The violence in today's story is a direct result of Herod's paranoia. History tells us that Herod was a deeply violent and fearful ruler. It didn't take much for him to suspect a plot against him. He killed his own wife and sons because he feared they would rise up to take his throne.

So when the Magi show up at Herod's doorstep and ask him where they might find the one who was born king of the Jews, Herod isn't just alarmed. He's terrified. He takes them at their word, believes that the Messiah, the long-promised ruler of Israel, has arrived. But this isn't good news for Herod. This new ruler presents a threat to Herod's throne, a threat to the life he has grown accustomed to living, a threat to his power, possibly a threat to his life.

So when his first plan to find and kill this threat fails, and the Magi return home by a different route, Herod hatches a new plan. Based on the Magi's information, he knows that this child wouldn't be older than two, and that he was born in Bethlehem. So he orders his soldiers to march into Bethlehem and kill all the boys two-years old and younger.

Just weeks ago, we were singing "O Little Town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie." Now, this city of David is a place of weeping. And so, says Matthew, Jeremiah's prophecy is fulfilled:

"A voice is heard in Rama,
weeping and great mourning,
Rachel weeping for her children
and refusing to be comforted
because they are no more."

Rachel, you'll remember, struggled to have children. She spent years watching her sister Leah give birth before she finally bore Jacob a son, whom she named "Joseph," which means, "let there be another." Rachel's wish came true, and while the whole family was traveling from Bethel to Hebron and came upon Ephrath, or Bethlehem, Rachel gave birth to a second son.

But there were complications this time, and Rachel died in childbirth. With her last breath she named the child "Benoni," which means "son of my suffering." Jacob, perhaps unable to bear the sorrow of this name, changed his name to Benjamin – "son of my right hand." And they buried Rachel in a makeshift grave along the road to Bethlehem.

Hundreds of years later, the prophet Jeremiah watched as the children of Israel were marched along the road from Jerusalem, past Bethlehem, and into captivity in Babylon. The weeping prophet could not bear his grief alone, so he called on mother Rachel to weep with him for the children of her sorrow.

And now Rachel weeps again. As Herod's soldiers march through Bethlehem, her cries are joined by every mother's cry, as a tyrant's paranoia and malice bring about senseless devastation and loss.

This is a tragic story. And it's a story with some tension to it. Because God doesn't stop this senseless devastation and loss. He escapes it.

An angel of the Lord appears to Joseph in a dream and tells him to flee with Mary and Jesus to Egypt. Which is not without its irony. Egypt was a place where, many years before, a tyrannical king had ordered the death of baby boys. Egypt was a place where God's people were persecuted. Now, it's a place of refuge for the son of God. But it also begs the question – God saved the people from the clutch of Pharaoh's hand. Why could he not save them now from Herod's? Why does the

Son have to flee, instead of the Father simply staying the hand of the tyrant?

I suppose that's the question all of us have, much of the time. Why does God not intervene? Why doesn't God cause leaders to rise up in Israel and Palestine that are determined and equipped to find a two-state solution? Why doesn't God afflict Putin, making him unable to lead his country in senseless aggression against Ukraine? Why did God allow Hitler to gain so much power? Why did God not keep the terrorists from boarding those flights on 9/11?

People have searched for centuries, millenia, to the answers to these kinds of questions. Which means there are no easy answers. But part of the answer I keep coming back to is one I heard in a lecture given by Jerry Sittser, who lost his wife, four-year-old daughter, and mother in a car accident when a drunk driver careened into on-coming traffic. As he reflected on loss, grief, and faith a few years later in a January Series lecture at Calvin, he said that bad things happen in the world because, ultimately, and perhaps bewilderingly, God is a God of love.

God is a God of relationship. And love is not a thing that can be forced. Love is a decision, love is a choice. For us to love God, to truly love God and turn towards God, we must also be able to turn away from him, to choose something that is not of God, something that is not born out of love.

And so we are not robots. We aren't marionettes on a string. We have free will. We can make choices. Choices that bring us closer to God, and choices that lead us on a path of destruction and despair. And in a world where Satan still has our ear, it's all too easy to make those choices.

The story of the massacre of the innocents has been portrayed by many artists over the years. One of my favourite paintings is this one, called *Massacre of the Innocents,* by the French painter Léon Cogniet in 1842.

Unlike most depictions of this scene that show carnage and mayhem, Cogniet only alludes to this on the left side. All our attention is focused on this mother, cowering in a corner, desperately trying to calm and quiet her child as she hides.

And she is looking directly at us. Not with a gaze of despair, or longing, or sadness, but a gaze of terror…and accusation.

Because Cogniet has painted this so that *we* are the soldier.

We have just rounded the corner and discovered this mother and her child.

And her gaze says to us, "How could you do this? How could you be part of this?"

Her gaze says, "You are Herod."

That's not something we're comfortable with. It isn't something we want to contemplate. We don't like to think of ourselves as capable of doing great harm.

And yet the choice to love God or to love evil lies before each one of us. We might not follow a path that leads to murder and mass destruction. But we make choices, all the time, that cause pain and sorrow, choices of betrayal and hurt, choices of apathy and silence. The world is full of violence and heartache…and do we do anything about it? Or do our own feelings of helplessness lead us to want to escape the news and simply focus on our own lives, our own feelings of safety and security and well-being?

There is tension in this story of the flight to Egypt. A tension we have to reckon with. A tension not just about God, but about ourselves. In a world full of injustice, full of violence, full of senseless death, full of sorrow, all too often, we are the ones who flee, turning away when we might turn towards, and try to help.

Maybe there isn't much we could in fact do about Israel and Palestine and the Sudan and Russia and Ukraine. But there is much we can do in our own communities, to house the unhoused, to welcome the stranger, to defend the wronged, to support those who feel broken, to love where there is no love.

When we ask, "Why does God not do something?" in the midst of the brokenness, we must also ask… "Why don't we?"

The story of the flight into Egypt is a grim story. But there is, at the end, a turn towards hope. Herod, the tyrant, dies. It's safe to return to Israel. But Joseph doesn't take his family back to Judea, to the land of Bethlehem and Jerusalem, for fear that Herod's son might be as bad as his father. Rather, this little family travels to Galilee, to the town of Nazareth, an inconsequential village full of farmers in a province full of foreigners and outsiders.

This is where Jesus will grow up. And begin his ministry. Not as a king in a palace, not with outward displays of power that would topple tyrannical kings. But as the son of a carpenter, who gathers around him a motley crew of fishermen and farmers, and who will preach that the Kingdom is in fact near. Because Jesus moves towards people…in love.

And so Jesus will not ultimately stay away from the danger, but move towards it. In the end he moved towards Jerusalem. Towards the powerful leaders who wanted him dead.

And ultimately, towards the people who needed him. Towards the people he could save, not through power, but by giving his life.

Jesus moved towards people.

And he calls us to do the same.

In 1988, Northern Ireland experienced two weeks of darkness that made any hope of peace seem impossible. On March 6, three unarmed IRA members were killed by British special forces in Gibraltar. Ten days later, a loyalist gunman named Michael Stone launched an attack on those gathered for the funerals of those three members, killing three people and wounding fifty more.

Three days later, at the funeral for one of those killed by Stone, two British soldiers mistakenly drove into the path of the funeral procession. The grief-stricken mob surrounded the car, hauled the soldiers out, and began to beat them.

Into the midst of this violence ran Father Alec Reid. Reid was a Catholic priest at Clonard monastery, and was devoted to non-violence and peace. When the two soldiers were thrown to the ground, Reid lay on top of them, shielding them with his own body.

When he was thrown aside and the men were taken away again by the mob, Reid ran to get his car to follow them. As he neared his vehicle, he heard shots. Running back, he found the soldiers on the ground – the crowd has disappeared. He desperately tried to revive them with mouth-to-mouth, but to no avail. As he took out his rosary to perform the last rites, a photographer took one of the most famous images of the Troubles. Father Reid, looking directly at us, not with a look of accusation, but of deep, deep compassion.

Father Reid went towards the conflict, went towards the other, went into the darkness in love. He couldn't save those two soldiers that day.

But Reid was at that funeral to collect a secret paper from the IRA to pass along to their unionist counterparts, in the work of facilitating peace talks between the two groups, peace talks held at Clonard monastery. It would be 10 more years before formal peace was realized, but Father Reid's work was instrumental in germinating that peace.

Father Reid modeled what peace looked like, what compassion looked like, what love looked like in the midst of senseless violence and despair. Karen Campbell is a pastor from Northern Ireland. She was a young teenager in 1988, and in a reflection she wrote last month, she notes the despair she felt in those weeks and months and years.

Just this past Advent, however, she watched a documentary about Father Reid, called *14 Days.* She writes, "As I watched the documentary…about the peacemaking efforts of Father Alec Reid, it helped bring healing in my own mind that even in these traumatic scenes from childhood, God was there and God was in them."

We are called to go towards the other. To go towards those places of pain and sadness and hurt and confusion, and bear witness in those places to the God who went into those places to redeem them. Who gave himself over to death in order that death might never be the end of the story.

What is God calling you to move towards? Is there a conflict within your family that needs to be reconciled? Is there a student in your class who you're being called to befriend? Is there a not-for-profit you're being called to support? Is there a truth you're being called to share? Is there conflict in the church that calls, not for a line in the sand, but for us to move towards each other as we seek to understand one another? Is there a part of the world you're being called to pray for, over and over and over and over again?

We pray trusting that God yet moves and acts and does wonders in the world. In Northern Ireland. In the Sudan. In Ukraine. In Kitchener-Waterloo. In Community CRC. We pray trusting that God uses us, as we move towards him and each other in love.

We pray because prayer is itself a way of moving towards conflict and darkness with hope. One year after those 14 days in Northern Ireland, people gathered en masse to pray in another divided country – Germany. People had been gathering in Nikolai Church in the East German city of Leipzig, for peace prayers every Monday night for years, but on October 9, 1989, they gathered by the thousands. The army was ready outside, braced for protest.

After praying together in churches across the city, the people did take to the streets, but armed not with the stones of previous demonstrations, but with candles, a symbol of non-violence. One city official later said, "We were ready for anything – except candles and prayers." With no one to attack, the tanks withdrew.

Some historians point to this prayer rally as the tipping point that led to the fall of communism in East Germany. The prayer rallies grew to 300,000 people, and one month to the day later, on November 9, 1989, the Berlin Wall came down.

Prayer is a way of moving towards the darkness with hope and peace. The German theologian Karl Barth once said, "to clasp the hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world."

So as we close, hear these words of blessing and prayer, written by Ken Sehested – a blessing he wrote for the beginning of a New Year.

May your home always be too
small to hold all of your friends.

May your heart remain ever supple,
fearless in the face of threat,
jubilant in the grip of grace.

May your hands remain open,
caressing, never clenched,
save to pound the doors
of all who barter justice
to the highest bidder.

May your heroes be earthy,
dusty-shoed and rumpled,
hallowed but unhaloed,
guiding you through seasons
of tremor and travail, apprenticed
to the godly art of giggling
amid haggard news and
portentous circumstance.

May your hankering be
in rhythm with heaven's,
whose covenant vows a dusty
intersection with our own:
when creation's hope and history rhyme.

May hosannas lilt from your lungs:
God is not done;
God is not yet done.

All flesh, I am told, will behold;
will surely behold.

Amen.

Dismiss Grades 5/6 discussion group.

Our song of response is a new one, one we introduced in Advent. It's a song of longing, of waiting, but also of trust, declaring that "God is not yet done," that the day of the Lord is at hand, that one day violence shall cease and all that is broken will be restored. So would you rise, in body or in spirit, as we sing this song of hope and faith.