

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

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¹³Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” ¹⁴Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, ¹⁵and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, “Out of Egypt I have called my son.”

¹⁶When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. ¹⁷Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

¹⁸ “A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.”

¹⁹When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, ²⁰“Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child’s life are dead.” ²¹Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. ²²But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. ²³There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, “He will be called a Nazorean.”

The lesson this morning is recorded in the *Gospel* of Matthew. The word “Gospel”, of course, comes from a Greek word that means “good news”. If you were paying attention, you probably noticed that this morning’s “good news” was a story about the insane murder of all the male babies in an entire geographic region. ... I will admit that doesn’t sound like very good news, but – you know – we have to learn to accept “the will of God”. ...

At this point, according to the conventional wisdom of many Christians, I should close my sermon and leave us all to contemplate “the will of God”.

That phrase, “the will of God” is used to explain many things. We are often desperate for explanations. When a tragedy is so profound, and a pain is so severe that we have to try to make sense of it in some way - we are often left with nothing else but to say “it must be the will of God”.

Leslie Weatherhead wrote about a friend he had in India. This friend had a good size family, but his youngest son was very special to him. A cholera epidemic came through the area. The little boy caught it and died. Weatherhead and his friend walked up and down the front porch of the house as the man grieved his loss. Finally the man said, "Well, I must accept the will of God." ... Weatherhead was troubled by that statement. He asked his friend, "What if a man came to your home now, tonight, and spread cholera germs on a handkerchief and held them to the face of one of your remaining children while he was asleep? What would you do?" The man snapped back, "I would kill that man, of course. Why would you ask such a question?" "Well, I was curious; because that's exactly what you just accused God of doing."

There is no shortage of evil in the world, but it cannot be written off as the will of God. Sometimes we're careless. We have accidents. We can burn a finger, or step on a nail, or get killed. We are that fragile. We can get sick. Poor health can slow us down, or limit the things we can do – or kill us. We'll never run out of examples of carelessness, unexplained illness, natural disasters...and we have all seen outright hatred – just like we find in this morning's text – still today shaking our nation to its foundations. And yet, we often try to find a reason or an explanation for these tragedies that have no explanation. We can only acknowledge that we are part of a sinful race and we have an imperfect relationship with God. It is *our* doing and *our* sin, not God's.

But, we look for explanations. We often hear statements like, "Sorrow refines life." ... But sorrow alone only reminds us of death. We hear, "God gave us this loss to teach us a lesson." What lesson? We already know that people die.

And after the pain and the loss and the destruction, Matthew recalls the words of Jeremiah, "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more." In the final analysis tragedy is tragedy – and it's not lessened by the thought that God caused it.

I do not believe in a God who practices premeditated murder, who would kill a member of my family to teach me a lesson.

But neither do I believe in a God who would allow my sins, or the sin of the world to leave him frustrated and useless.

And he doesn't.

The monstrous nature of sin is never more clearly demonstrated in the annals of recorded history than here in the second chapter of Matthew as we read of the murder of babies...*but that's not the point of the story*. The point is, even this most hideous of sins cannot stop the true will of God.

God's will and God's activity are described in this passage, but not in the senseless death; rather it is in the escape of Christ. The living God – living as a human being – continues to live in spite of sin.

History did not wait for the year 2007 to find a middle eastern despot who plotted mass murder. Herod sinned. God's will was not done when the babies were slaughtered. But God's will wasn't stopped. The Christ child escaped the sin of the world.

Here, as a baby, we have the first example of sin trying to overcome the life of Christ. Many more follow. After a forty day fast, Christ was tempted to worship Satan. He didn't. John the Baptist's head was cut off for proclaiming Christ's coming. He came anyway. A storm blew up on the sea and would have drowned him. He stopped it. He was told to be quiet – but he continued to preach. Finally he was killed, but he didn't stay dead.

Even death, the ultimate reminder of our sinful state, did not stop the true will of God. His will is not sorrow, nor pain, nor suffering, nor death. God's will is for a loving relationship with us. And that will is so strong that he sent his son into a sinful world to experience all these things with us so that he could reach us and tell us of his love. And bring us to him in that relationship.

Let us be careful what we attribute to the will of God. It is the greatest power humanity will ever experience. It is the power of love. It brought God to us as Jesus Christ. It brought us forgiveness of sins. It is not limited by our wisdom or our explanations of what is going on in the world. It is not boxed in by our sin. We cannot stop the will of God.

All the tragedy, all the sin in the world, cannot stop the will of God. People suffered in this morning's Gospel lesson...We might say this was a story of the greatest tragedy imaginable. But I can imagine a greater one – an even greater tragedy than the murder of these babies. God could stop loving us. There was a terrible sin, by Herod, and tragedy resulted. Don't we often think that because of terrible sin, ours, an even greater tragedy results. We think God cannot love us. We think we are too sinful. We come to believe that God is separated from us.

As we see in this morning's Gospel lesson, *sin does not stop the will of God*. Not even our own sin. Herod sinned and people suffered. That was not God's doing, but it didn't stop God; and Christ continued to live.

We sin. We cause our brothers and sisters to suffer. We cause ourselves to suffer. *Our* sins are not the will of God either, but neither will *they* stop it.

Our sins will not frustrate God's will to love us.

That's what God wants, and we won't stand in his way. We can reject his love, but we can't stop it. We will continue suffering and causing each other to suffer, but I tell you this morning – no one will ever be denied a loving relationship with God because he has sinned. That relationship can only be interrupted by refusal to accept God's forgiveness of that sin.

When we talk about "the will of God" we talk about his love. God's will is to love. If we say something is "the will of God" and it is not loving, then we are wrong. God's will is not found in sin. It is not God's will to push us up against meaninglessness. God's will is not found in death.

God's will is God's love. We can refuse to participate in it, but we can't stop it. We cannot stop God's love. We cannot explain it. We cannot frustrate it. We can accept it.

This is not a message of "What will be, will be", as if it doesn't matter what we do. This doesn't relieve us of any responsibility. This message is a ration of strength as we continue to live in a sinful world. We know that we are not overcome by the sin and the pain. We can continue to participate in God's will and God's love. Being loved by him, showing his love in our lives as forgiven, redeemed children of God, brothers and sisters to one another. Forgiving each other.

The sin we see. The sin we have to live through. Even the sin we do. None of it will stop the will of God.

Matthew wrote a Gospel lesson after all. The *good news* is found in this reading of death. The Gospel is not in the sin and pain. The Gospel is that God's will is not stopped. Jesus Christ continues to live. As long as Christ lives we are loved by God.