

28 December 2025
Christmas 1 and
Commemoration of the Holy Innocents

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“First Steps”

Text: Matthew 2:13-23; Galatians 4:4-7; Isaiah 63:7-14

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

We don't know for sure where and when Jesus took His first steps.

If you're a parent, you probably remember when your child took his or her first steps. It's a big moment! After learning how to flip over, then crawl, then “couch walk,” those first steps without hanging onto anything bring great joy to parent and child, and these days are probably captured on video and put on the internet for all to see.

But where and when the child Jesus took His first steps, we're not sure. *It might have been in Egypt.*

But we don't know because we don't know exactly how old Jesus was when the Wise Men came to see Him. When they came and Herod found out there was *another king* - a king of the Jews - who might rival him. A threat he had to nip in the bud. Because that's what Herods did. That was their well-earned reputation. Resort to violence to maintain your power.

So as we heard today, he commands that ***all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, be killed.*** Herod wasn't sure how old Jesus was either. So he builds in a buffer - kill all the baby boys two and under, and that will surely get his rival.

And faithful soldiers carried out his order. Herod was a king you didn't want to cross!

So now imagine being in Bethlehem . . . and being relatively new parents . . . and maybe your little boy had just taken his first steps . . . had just proudly let go of the table and awkwardly toddled over to Mom! Smiles and joy all around . . . until suddenly the door bursts open, a squad of soldiers bursts in, and a sword cuts short your child's life. His first steps, his last steps. What grief! What pain! Hurt that won't

soon go away! The words of the prophet fulfilled. ***Rachel weeping for her children; refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.***

Monsters don't just live under beds and in closets. They live in palaces, too.

But among that group of baby boys killed that day, Jesus is not included. Oh, He came to die, but it is not yet His time. ***When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son to be born***, and in the fullness of time He would ascend the cross and die, but that time was not yet. So Joseph, faithful Joseph, who didn't divorce Mary - quietly or otherwise, who stepped up, manned up, and became the guardian of Jesus, flees to Egypt in the middle of the night. And they stayed for a while. Again, we don't know how long. And maybe it was in this foreign land when *their* little boy, Jesus, took His first steps.

First steps of many steps. Steps that would take Him to Galilee, Judea, and Samaria. Steps that would take Him from boats at sea to the top of mountains. Steps that would take Him into sinners houses, kings palaces, and government headquarters. Steps that would finally, ultimately, lead to steps under the heavy burden of a cross, where His feet would be nailed in place, never to walk again. . . . At least, that was the hope of those who put Him there.

So Jesus did the exact opposite of Herod. He did not resort to violence to save His power, He *gave up* His power and sacrificed Himself to save you. Herod caused untold hurt, pain, and tears. Jesus came to take those very things away; that in His kingdom, there be no more hurt or pain, and He would wipe away every tear from our eyes. *And notice who's kingdom lasted . . . Not* the one which resorted to violence. Not the one that caused hurt, pain, and tears. The kingdom that lasted - and that will last - is the kingdom of sacrifice, love, consolation, and forgiveness.

For that is the way of God. He *can* exercise His almighty power, and sometimes does! Plenty of stories about that in the Bible! But that's not His first move. That's not what He wants to do. That comes only at the end . . . after calling to repentance, after working to save, after great patience and long-suffering. For God wants to *save* all people. So unlike Herod, who wanted to save Himself, and so whose first move is to kill - God sends His Son to lay down His life for the life of the world.

Which maybe should make us pause and think a bit . . . when we feel threatened, when things seem to be going wrong in our lives, when we get bad news . . . *what's our first move?* Is it, like Herod, to lash out? To violence? To lose our temper? To threaten? To punish? To torment? To try to save ourselves and what we want and what we have and hold onto it with all our might? We often do, I think. That's our sinful nature. Our selfish nature. Look out for number one. Whatever it takes. But

while that's what, I think, we *often* do, is that what we *should* do? Is that the best way to live? Is that going to make our kingdom last? Or is that really going to lead to our downfall? Is that going to *stop* the hurt and pain and tears, or only cause more? Maybe there's a better way?

Really . . . look at yourself, your life . . . *how have you been?*

Now, there are times when you might have to use might and defend yourself or your family. If you're a **father**, you've especially been called to that vocation. Being the head of the family is a place, a vocation, of service, not privilege. And you are to protect your wife and children - and not just physically, but financially, emotionally, spiritually. And there are times you will be called on to do that, like Joseph was. You might not want to. I'm sure Joseph wasn't jumping for joy having to move down to Egypt for a while! But you may be called on to do that. And mothers, too. And children, too, when your parents get older and need your help and protection.

Perhaps, though, you haven't done so good at that . . . perhaps you've been more like Herod, and through physical or verbal violence protected yourself first, served yourself first, put yourself first. If so, repent. Because there is a better way . . .

Because it isn't Herod's kingdom that we're still talking about. Sin doesn't, sin never (really) gets us what we want. The kingdom that lasts - and not just a lifetime, but *forever* - is Jesus'. A kingdom built on His blood, of laying down His life for you. A kingdom He brought you into by Baptism, where He also ran His sword through that old sinful nature of yours and raised a new man to live a new life. And He promised to provide all you need to do so. Whatever it is! So what are you short of? Love, joy, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, forgiveness? He has that here for you, giving you His Spirit, feeding you with His Body and Blood. To fill the world not with Herods, but with Christians.

For there are enough Herods out there. You know that. You've experienced it. You've been at the end of a pointed tongue, or worse. What the world needs is more Christians, more Christ, more forgiveness, more love.

So in the fullness of time, God sent forth His Son *for you*, to serve and to save. And now in the fullness of time, God sends you to serve others. Not to save them - that's Jesus' job. And He did it. For after He laid down His life for you He rose back to life again, defeating sin, death, grave, satan, and hell. That you live a life free from fear of those things, free to love and serve and forgive, as He has done for you. And when the fear starts to creep back, when the Herod in you starts to burst out, by the Spirit God has given you, **cry out "Abba! Father!"** Father, help! And He will. For that's the very thing He loves to hear, and the very thing He loves to do.

It might not be easy for you . . . serving, putting others first. First steps never are. And first steps are often clumsy and end with us on our butt! But as delighted as parents are with their children's first steps, so is your Father delighted in your first steps. It's okay if you're clumsy. It's okay if you wind up on your butt! He'll be there to pick you up again. And the next steps will be easier, and a little more sure. And you'll grow in your repentance and love and forgiveness, too. But it all starts with that first step . . .

Where was Jesus'? His first step? I don't know. But I know that His last was not when He went to the cross, as those who put Him there hoped! For after He led His disciples to the top of a mountain and ascended into heaven, He promised to return the same way. ***In the fulness of time.***

And one day, you'll take your last step. When? Where? I don't know. But in Christ, as a Christian, it actually won't be your last step. For you, too, will rise from death to life. You too, will ascend with Christ to His kingdom that - unlike Herod's - has no end. A kingdom with no more hurt or pain or tears, just joy. Christmas joy. Easter joy. Joy that has no end.

So on this Fourth Day of Christmas, this First Sunday after Christmas, this day of Commemoration of the Holy Innocents, those baby boys in Bethlehem that lost their lives, your true love, your heavenly Father, gave to you not four calling birds, but a Son, calling you to His life. Calling you to what's better. To a kingdom not of this world and that has no end. For this Jesus was born. For this He took His first steps. For this: *for you.*

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.