

WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH



SERMON

January 19, 2025

The Evil Around

Dr. Jo Forrest

The Evil Around

Dr. Jo Forrest

© 2025 by Dr. Jo Forrest and Westminster Presbyterian Church.

All rights reserved.

No part of this sermon may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the author.

Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: January 19, 2025

We might have we packed away the magic of Christmas when we pulled down the twinkling lights. Since we need to measure every step on icy walkways, we no longer look at the stars of the night sky.

Football lost its allure. Rampant wildfires demand our attention. And we brace for the transfer of power at the highest office of our country. No wonder it's easy to forget any reverence we felt about the incarnation.

To celebrate the life and legacy of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr requires us to remember the murderous racism he faced and that plagues us still as a nation.

Against the sorrows of the world, Epiphany asks us to hold onto the light of the Christ child a little longer.

His light guides us. And Jesus' birth also shines a light on the tragic and sorrowful aspects of life.

Today we turn to the Gospel of Matthew as Joseph ponders what's next with his tender family.

Dear God, it stretches our imagination to think that you descended into a woman's womb to be born into our common life. It humbles us to know how much you desire to walk with us. It gives us courage to feel you alongside of us. Silence the noise around and startle us with the truth of the world Jesus entered. Amen.

Matthew 2:13-23

Now after the magi 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.”

¹⁴ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt ¹⁵ and 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.”

¹⁶ When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, 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 magi.

¹⁷ Then what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:

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.”

¹⁹ When 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 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 Nazarene.”

When’s the last time you heard this story, often called, “The Slaughter of the Innocents” in worship? Throughout the ages, painters captured this story with morbid detail only for their works to rest in museums’ archives.

Biblical scholars place today’s story in the genre of “texts of terror” among the other instances of genocide, infanticide, and horrors we rarely study from scripture.

When faith sidesteps stories about the wanton murder of entire groups of people and particularly children, it feeds us a shallow religiosity.

This story matters because it tells us the truth: the sometimes-difficult truth of unjust rulers, and violence, and private grief, and trauma carried from generation to generation.

And this story tells the hopeful truth that God does not stand back at a distance from the worst of human behavior. God

entrusts the infant Jesus into the hands of the humble people to shelter divine life. *God joins us.*

Jesus' birth upsets the order. He comes as *God's chosen leader*, the one who is to bring about the peace, justice, and equity of the kingdom of God. And so all earthly kings who amass their wealth on the backs of less fortunate humans are terrified.

Herod happens to be one of the many examples in scripture of such rulers. He symbolizes the long line of monarchs before him and the heads of state since then who prey upon common people and manipulate with fear in their grasp for power.

Herod is so terrified that God will, in this child, restore peace and justice that he is willing to slaughter all the infants of a whole region.

Joseph, warned by an angel, flees this carnage, and moves his family to Egypt.

The writer of Matthew's gospel nudges us to remember an earlier story of a man named Joseph whose flight to Egypt, recorded in the Book of Genesis, saves the life of the Israelite people.

Once the Israelites settle in Egypt, they become enslaved. Despite the hardship, the community grew in number and strength. Their presence and devotion to God threatened Pharaoh, who demands the murder of all the Israelite infant boys.

Today's story of Joseph recalls the courage of women long ago who save an infant boy, who grows to liberate the people – Moses.

Stories from the Old Testament, this story of Herod's murderous rampage, and the story of our lives demand we see the brutality of those who will stop at nothing to twist humans into their version of a kingdom.

We cannot ignore the evil around and we need to know our ability to keep it from destroying wide swaths of humankind. Our faith history presents God's love prevailing through the courage of humans like you and me.

This year marks the 80th anniversary of the liberation of the Nazi death camps, camps created to exterminate Jews and any who fell outside of Adolph Hitler's sick notion of an ideal human specimen.

Despite undercurrents that attempt to become mainstream and deny the events of the holocaust, the facts do not lie. Following Germany's defeat in World War I, Hitler gained popularity by promising the resurgence of an Arian nation.

Hitler's powergrab hinged on convincing citizens to distrust anyone he painted as an outsider. He stoked fears against Jews, any LGBTQ+ and their allies, and those who opposed him. The Nazi's rounded up, imprisoned and killed more than six million.

Twenty years ago, at the 60th anniversary, Gerhard Schröder, Germany's chancellor, reminded people that the concentration camps could not be blamed simply on the "demon Hitler". Even if the majority of Germans now alive bore no guilt, he explained, "The evil of Nazi ideology did not come out of nowhere. The brutalization of thought and the lack of moral inhibition had a history...the Nazi ideology was willed by people and carried out by people." ¹

Five years ago, the world sought to commemorate the 75th anniversary in solidarity across nations and ethnicities. Those planning events anticipated it would be the last time survivors could gather since more than half had died by 2020.

Rather than honor the liberators and survivors, leaders from Poland and Russia traded barbs, insulted one another, and by refusing to stand alongside one another, boycotted events.

The director of Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw said that despite the fact so many people were "touched by hell" during the war, politicians were inciting the same hate. He said "The language and value systems...that emerged after the Second World War are being forgotten. People don't want to listen to it."

People don't want to hear the truth of what had happened and could happen again. People don't want to pursue the hard work of maintaining a world that is safe for all humanity.

¹ Stuart Weinblatt, "Sixtieth Anniversary of Liberation of Auschwitz" Congregation B'nai Tzedek Potomac, MD, January 29, 2005 potomacrebbe@bnaitzedek.org

Zofia Posmysz, at the time a 96-year-old survivor, said that hearing the political rhetoric “takes me back immediately...I fear over time it will become easier to distort history...I cannot say it will never happen again, because when you look at some leaders today, those dangerous ambitions, pride, and sense of being better than others are still at play. Who knows where they can lead.”²

Zofia has since died and as she predicted, the hateful rhetoric and antisemitism and racism are becoming common.

As we approach this 80th anniversary, no political leader, head of state, or monarch can be trusted to speak at the service held at Auschwitz in ways that respects the truth.

Only the few remaining survivors and those who liberated the camps will be offered the opportunity to witness to their experiences.³

Do we understand the evil around us, how it exists, and how it spreads?

Martin Niemöller was a prominent Lutheran pastor in Germany.

² Marc Santora, “75 Years After Auschwitz Liberation, Worry that ‘Never Again, Is Not Assured,” *The New York Times*, January 25, 2020.

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/jan/13/speeches-by-politicians-banned-at-80th-anniversary-of-auschwitzs-liberation>

In the 1920s and early 1930s, he sympathized with many Nazi ideas and supported radical right-wing political movements. After Hitler came to power in 1933, Niemöller became an outspoken critic of Hitler's interference in the Protestant Church. He paid the price and spent the last eight years of Nazi rule in prisons and concentration camps.

He is perhaps best known for his insight that has since been etched into the walls of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum.

First they came for the socialists,
and I did not speak out—because I was not a socialist.

Then they came for the trade unionists,
and I did not speak out—because I was not a trade unionist.

Then they came for the Jews,
and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—
and there was no one left to speak for me.⁴

How does evil come to possess people? How do we guard against it controlling or influencing us? That's an age-old question all faiths wrestle with.

Let me offer what is described as a fairytale in the Muslim tradition.

⁴ <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/martin-niemoeller-first-they-came-for-the-socialists>

The first time Satan sees Adam. Satan circles around him, inspecting him like a used car or something, this new creation -- God's favorite, apparently. Satan's unimpressed, doesn't get it. And then Satan steps into Adam's mouth, disappears completely inside him and passes through all his guts and intestines and finally emerges out the (other end).

And when he gets out, Satan's laughing and laughing. Rolling around. He passes all the way through the first man and he's rolling around laughing, in tears, and he says to God, 'This is what you've made? He's all empty! All hollow!' He can't believe his luck. How easy his job is going to be. Humans are just a long emptiness, waiting to be filled. ⁵

But we need not remain empty. God's love conceives humans with the capacity for love. And this same love surrounds us with people to offer and teach us the daily acts of love.

Joseph knew his faith history and in the face of evil -- he trusted God. The love he felt for God and this child infused him with the courage to defy the tyrant and keep the infant safe.

When love enters into you, it solidifies into the courage to do what you cannot do alone, but what you must do. Courage is born from love.

⁵ Kaveh Akbar, *Martyr!*, (New York: Vintage, 2025) 304. I edited the text slightly for worship by editing out "his anus" to out "the other end."

The incarnation doesn't end until this child has grown up, preached God's mercy, been crucified and died and then raised again.

Actually, the incarnation never ends. It continues as we join Jesus and become a part of his story, of raising up to new life, choosing to speak the truth, and standing with the marginalized, even in the face of the very real threats that rise up here and now.

The capacity for evil is around us. The love of God is also. It's right here among us and within us. Now it's up to us.



WESTMINSTER

2040 Washington Road

Pittsburgh, PA 15241

412-835-6630

www.westminster-church.org