

“Go, take the child”

Matthew 2:13-23

December 29, 2019

Matthew's Christmas story radically differs from Luke's or John's. Matthew's announcement of the coming birth of Christ focuses on Joseph, not Mary. Matthew's Christmas has no shepherds hearing angelic songs of glory and peace. Quite the contrary, Matthew tells of political intrigue and death threats on the infant Jesus, before he could reach his second birthday.

Matthew pictures Jesus being born into a violent world where Jesus had to stare down a kingdom of death all the way to the cross. No sooner had he been born than an angel of the Lord warned Joseph in a dream to "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." As if being away from Nazareth for the birth was not enough, now the holy family had to be on the run to Egypt! Once a place of slavery for Jesus' people, Egypt now becomes a place of refuge. This self-imposed exile would be later called to mind as the fulfillment of the prophecy, "Out of Egypt I have called my son."

Let me be candid: I don't really like this story. I hope that wasn't too blunt, but I had to say it. I've been ministering at Gordon for a little while and in all those years, I've probably led more than 800 services. Today is only the 3rd time I've used this particular lectionary reading. That's less than .004% of the services. That's how much I don't like this story.

This is not a comfortable story. But it is an important story. We need to read this text for a couple of reasons. We need to read it simply because it is a part of the birth story of Jesus. Whether we like it or not, whether we accept all of its details as historically accurate or not, it's a part of the story

Even more importantly, it has things to tell us.

First, Matthew tells us about his understanding of Jesus, and that helps us, when we read the rest of the Gospel of Matthew. As we have noticed already, Matthew has a fondness for showing the ancestry of Jesus, Jewish heritage, and Jesus' life - indeed, his very conception and birth - as fulfillment of Hebrew scripture. Yet, Matthew does hasten to add that Gentiles recognized Jesus at his birth, with a story of the magi and that's what we read next week.

Many scholars note that Matthew also sees Jesus as a sort of "new Moses" and patterns this gospel accordingly, with five sections of teaching thought to parallel the five books of the Torah traditionally attributed to Moses. Accordingly, the story of the slaughter of babies brings to mind quite quickly the similar story surrounding the birth of Moses.

Second, the other important fact this story tells us, is how to live in a world where tyrants rule and refugees flee, and life is, well, not always comfortable. Let's face it; while we might want to stay in the mood of Christmas and savour it as long as we can, we don't live there. We live in the real world of the every day, and variations of the events told in Matthew chapter 2, can appear, in one form or another, in any newscast today.

We live in a world of Herods: of governments increasingly relying on fear to build up and consolidate and hang onto power; a world of people who don't have homes; a world where people don't have any idea where they will be tomorrow, or whether anyone else even cares.

We live in a world where we would rather spend more money to incarcerate people than educate them, even though we know that every dollar spent on education reaps huge social benefits – and in the long run saves both tax dollars and human lives. Resources of all kinds – time, money, love, care – invested in our children and our youth now, will benefit not only them, but all of us and those around us in ways we cannot even begin to imagine.

This knowledge threatens the Herods of our world, as it threatened Herod back then. Children who are educated, children who feel good about themselves, and children who learn how to think for themselves and express themselves, do not tolerate oppression and nonsense from grown-ups very well. And that scares the devil out of all the King Herods of the world – think Malala Yousafzai from Pakistan and Greta Thunberg from Sweden.

Herod the Great did not succeed in killing the infant Christ.

But if we can put Christmas away with the decorations; if we can get excited about children's faces when they see Santa, but not care about what goes into their minds and their tummies for the rest of the year, if we can be convinced to live in fear and teach our children to live in fear, knowing that fear only breeds violence . . . then King Herod will have finally won.

As I reflected on the scripture text, I kept hearing the words of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King from one of his sermons. The sermon is based upon the story of the transfiguration. Dr. King talked about being on a mountaintop, and looking across to a mountain opposite him. It's a well-known sermon. At one point during the sermon, he said, "I wish I could stay on the mountaintop tonight but the valley calls me." The valley calls me

I'd like to stay in the joy and love of Christmas. But reality calls me; it calls all of us.

Jesus calls us.

Not to leave Christmas behind, but to take it with us: into Egypt, into our homes, into our workplaces, into our schools, into our indoor playgrounds, into our journeys around the block and around the world.

One thing that we notice in Matthew's birth story is – the encounter with Joseph, the story of the magi – is that people are often guided by voices. It might be a dream, or an angel. And I'm not too concerned about the particulars of where and how.

And may I say, let us we hear God's voice in whatever form it needs to come, calling us, challenging us, prodding us, and pestering us, and if necessary: "Go. Take the Christ child." Into the world. There is work to be done."