

“The Other Side of Christmas”

Date: December 29, 2019

Place: Lakewood UMC

Text: Matthew 2:13-23

Theme: Opposition to the Gospel

Occasion: Christmas 1, year A

It's not hard to feel a little let down on the day after Christmas. Quicker than a twinkle in Santa's eye, the stores have taken down the Christmas decorations and put up their Valentine's Day display. The Christmas music that played every day on the radio is now silent and the rock music which played there before has returned.

Presbyterian pastor Jon M. Walton wrote about this phenomenon. He says, "Nothing is as over as Christmas, when it's over. The empty boxes, the pretty paper on the floor, the stray tinsel from the tree which the cat played with and left on the sofa, the empty cartons of eggnog stuffed into the trash bag.

Life has come back to normal, whatever that is, and it means that the diversion of the past few weeks, the frenzy and the fuss, the lights and the glitter are packed away once again, just like the star at the top of the tree; taken down and carefully wrapped, padded and protected in its box."

And what is left? Conflicts around the globe, homeless people sleeping in bus stop shelters, worries about health, kids that concern us, jobs that wear us down. We're back to where we left off before the holidays."

We're kind of like the folks who were left in town after the Lone Ranger had been for a visit, and we may ask, "Who was that masked man?" But better still, "Who was that babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, left lying in a manger?"

Well, we haven't moved that far from Christmas, just a couple of days away from celebrating Christ's birth. But there is an inevitable let-down. So, it's back to normal. Guess what! Mary and Joseph didn't get to stay in Bethlehem, and neither can we. It's back to the real world, with all of its problems.

When Christmas is over, we get to the *other* side of Christmas. Exit the shepherds, in come the wise men from the East. Exit the stable, now it's the king's palace. Exit the angels, and in comes Herod.

Exit Mary, singing with joy at the announcement she's pregnant, and enter Rachel, but she is not singing; she's screaming. "I heard a voice in Ramah. It was Rachel weeping for the children."

The other side of Christmas is the ugly part. Herod is intimidated and all Jerusalem is troubled. Herod pretends he wants to worship Jesus, all the while issuing death warrants against Bethlehem's babies.

The soldiers went house to house searching for the little ones, doors crashing inward, chariots screeching through the streets and mothers clutching their babies behind cellar doors. "Shh. Don't even breathe. It's a soldier."

This is the other side of Christmas, the side we didn't tell you about on Tuesday, the side that pits the gospel of good news against the forces of hate and hurt and harm. Like it or not, we have got to face it. The gospel isn't good news to everyone, nor will everyone accept the good news.

If you stand up for what is good and right and just, you're going to make enemies. If you stand up for your religious beliefs, you're going to offend somebody. If share your faith with someone, someone else is going to ridicule you for doing it. When you do what is right, you will often meet resistance.

There was opposition to the gospel of Jesus Christ from the very beginning. Matthew shows that God and His Son were a threat to the status quo, not only after Jesus began to preach, but from the word “go.” Jesus was a threat to Herod. Jesus is a threat to all who are like Herod.

Certainly when Jesus was grown, the things he said and did challenged Herod and what he stood for. It’s still true today. Wherever there is a voice for truth and justice, mercy and compassion, there will be those who oppose it.

Martin Luther King Jr. had a vision of a society where all people are treated equal. The white clergy of his time told Martin he was going too fast. The black people should just wait; change doesn’t happen overnight. They tried to pacify him, saying they believed his message, but felt he was upsetting people too much.

Truth has a way of doing that, upsetting people. It challenges our world-view. It makes us uncomfortable to think we might have to change the way we do things, or the way we think.

Jesus once said, “I am the way, the truth and the life.” His truth, God’s truth, coming into the world has a way of upsetting people. Case in point: King Herod.

God’s love disturbs power. It brings forth rage from those whose lives are built on greed and power, evil and violence. The light came into the world and it threatened the darkness. Herod tried to snuff out the light, forcing Joseph and his family to flee for their lives.

This is the other side of Christmas. The darkness reacts to the light coming into the world. Here’s what that means to you and me:

If we are going to be followers of Christ, if we are going to be radical disciples for Jesus, we have to know what we’re up against. The forces of

darkness are going to fight back. If we say that we carry the light of Christ into the world, we need to know the forces of darkness are going to oppose us, resist us, resent us.

So how do we prepare and respond to this opposition?

One, we stay anchored in Christ. We stay close to our Lord in prayer and Bible study. We keep on doing our Christian discipleship, one day at a time, not being afraid, but living courageously.

Second, we don't let the forces of darkness intimidate us. We continue to do all the good we can, to as many people as we can, as often as we can. We stand up for our faith, sharing it joyfully. And we are reminded: love is more powerful than hate.

Third, we need to remember God is with us, always. The other side of Christmas is filled with darkness and hate and violence. But into that darkness, God sends His light. It would be nice if God simply removed the forces of darkness and evil, but He doesn't.

However, we have God's Word that He will never forsake us or leave us alone. So yes, we still have to fight against principalities and powers in this world of ours. But we don't have to face the struggles alone. We have the promise that God is with us.

Last Tuesday was Christmas. You remember Christmas, don't you? Christmas is the celebration of Jesus' birth, when "God so loved the world that he sent His only begotten Son." The angels proclaimed the good news, the glad tidings of great joy.

But then, Herod heard about it and he killed the baby boys of Bethlehem. That's the *other* side of Christmas, the side we didn't talk about on Christmas Eve. Then was not the right time - we needed to

celebrate the good news. But we can't forget the other side of Christmas either. It kind of brings you down, doesn't it?

But I have a suspicion that maybe, maybe this is the reason why the good news which begins in a manger, ends on a cross. What do you think?

Let us pray: "O God, we give you thanks for loving the world so much you sent us a Savior. Help us to treasure Jesus in our hearts. Give us holy boldness to share Jesus with others. And give us courage when others would try to stop us, or ridicule us or criticize us. Help us to be faithful even when opposed. In the name of your son, our Lord and Savior, Jesus, we pray. Amen."