

Epiphany Sunday & Flight to Egypt

January 4, 2015

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown, MD

Readings: Matthew 2: 1-23

Grace and peace to you from God – Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen

If we had our choice, most would prefer a clearly either/or world. Good would be purely good and bad would be unquestionably bad. Every question would have either a right or wrong answer.... Things either fit or don't.... Choices are either good or bad.... each relationships simply healthy or not. We want our holidays to be clearly either/or, too. Christmas is to be perfectly happy -- families full of good cheer, differences or hurts forgotten, everyone's quirkiness accepted with love. There's to be no lumpy gravy, every gift a winner and all the children play without a single squabble.

We may want everything and everyone to be clearly and definitively good or bad but that's not our world. And that perfect Christmas? After you have a few under your adult belt, you certainly update your expectations. A "good" Christmas is when Uncle Harry makes it through most of dinner without making a wildly offensive remark.... the cousins don't arrive hours late... no one gets food poisoning... and the kids end the day without bruises or broken bones. If truth be told, we often cause ourselves our greatest stress and disappointments when we insist on clinging to the notion that events and people will either be right and good or wrong and atrocious... and that Christmas will either be perfect or a disaster.

No matter what kind of Christmas you may have had, St. Matthew is here to tell us like it is. We don't live in a simple either/or world. When the Son of God came to earth, he was not born in comfortable circumstances with great fanfare but in the quiet of the night amid stable animals. When the Son of God came to earth, the stars and some gentile foreigners celebrated his birth but the local ruler, Herod, wanted him dead. When the Son of God came to earth, his family didn't go home to the open arms of family and friends, but were forced to quickly pack up to escape the violence and oppression of the powerful who

would kill innocent children on a paranoid whim. “Before the Prince of Peace had learned to walk and talk, he was [already] a homeless refugee with a price on his head.”¹

You might be tempted to describe Matthew’s Christmas story as dark, dismal and a downer. But that either/or mentality won’t hold up to Matthew’s telling. The wonder of a star and the reverence of the Magi happens despite the likes of Herod. In dreams the wisemen and Joseph find their plans changed and protect the newborn Savior. The atrocities of the oppressor don’t destroy baby Jesus, whose ways of love and grace would challenge the violence, ways and death of the world. Matthew points us to the sad truths of evil AND the bigness of God’s power to deliver and defeat it. Wherever darkness looms, there are glimmers of God’s grace. Wherever danger and pain threaten to overcome, God does not turn away but comes to walk beside those who suffer. When Rachels weep, Jesus reveals God’s promise to “abide with us until that day when every tear is wiped away.”²

If Jesus is to be Emmanuel — God-with-us — he must be with us not only in the beauty of the stars or the miracle of generous gifts, but also where the pain of our world intersects our lives.³ Three hours before I was to lead worship on Christmas Eve, my favorite night of the year, I got the news that my sister’s surgery went well but it was ovarian cancer they had found. I can’t tell you how I put one foot before the other and made it through those two worship services. But I will tell you this — I still enjoyed the children as they helped enact Luke’s nativity story, amazed at the courage of a boy to take on the role of Mary that none of the girls wanted and tickled by the dramatic flare of our shepherds enacting the fear of the angels.... I still felt great gratitude when, just before early worship, our grown-up Jensen offered to acolyte and Abigail agreed to be the reader... I still found incredible peace each time we lit our candles and sang “Silent Night” in the shadows.... I was so very happy that John Britton, one of my first confirmands at Haven, agreed to be Assisting Minister for the 10:30 am service and that Anna, a new confirmand, was glad to be the acolyte.... I still marveled that Don and Kim stepped forward to offer to turn down the lights for “Silent Night” before I even had time to fret over

who would do it.... I still found great comfort in sharing communion and in each “Merry Christmas.” My only sister and sibling, who I love with all my heart, had cancer and yet that did not stop God from being present and real in the Word, the Meal and this community.

It’s like an especially meaningful Christmas pageant that took place at one pastor’s church. “It began as a traditional pageant, with children dressed as shepherds and angels and donkeys and such. The congregation sang hymns. Miniature versions of Mary and Joseph walked solemnly up the aisle and knelt by the manger. But then something totally unexpected happened. Little Mary pulled back the blanket swaddling her baby Jesus to reveal that it was really a wooden cross. She lifted up that cross and held it over the manger.” It was startling and sobering. Some even took offense, thinking it ruined the spirit of the evening. But the baby born in Bethlehem *would* years later be killed by those who found him a threat to their power and ways. Jesus would be executed as a common criminal for the love of us. “But beyond the cross is the empty tomb. The Herods of this world cannot defeat God.” Mary and Joseph were eventually able to return to Nazareth to build new lives and raise Jesus, who would change human existence as we know it.⁴

In this second chapter of his gospel, Matthew calls us to a faith that is neither naive or simple. Followers of Jesus do not hide their eyes or ignore the cruelty or suffering of our world. But followers of Jesus believe his life, death and resurrection show that God’s love will triumph and nothing in this world can separate us from God’s light, grace and presence. Christmas today and life after Christmas Day is much like that first Christmas in Matthew’s gospel ---- it was very messy and God was very present. Or as Anna Weems says in one of her poems:

“The Christmas Spirit is that hope which tenaciously clings to the hearts of the faithful
and announces in the face of any Herod the world can produce
and all the inn doors slammed in our faces
and all the dark nights of our souls
that with God
all things are still possible
that even now unto a Christ is born!”⁵ Amen

ENDNOTES

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1. Tom Wright, Matthew for Everyone, Part One London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002 p. 14
 2. Sarah Winset Wiles, "The Gift of Grief" February 15, 2009 as posted on day1/org
 3. Adapted from Wright, p. 15.
 4. Fourth Quarter Sermons 2007 quotes from King Duncan's "A Word of Hope for a Hard World", Dynamic Preaching, 2007, 0-000-0000-20
 5. Ann Weems, "The Christmas Spirit" Kneeling at Bethlehem Westminster John Knox Press, 1987