

Matthew 2: 13-23 1 Christmas 1/1/17 Pastor Bill Uetricht

One of the great things about Christmas is that it has this way of taking us away from ordinary life. There is a magical quality to it that transcends life as it normally is. And for me, that is good. We all need the opportunity to get away from it all. Life is often serious, sad, flat, preoccupied with the rational, with performance, achieving, getting by, trudging through. Christmas rightfully gives us a necessary break—a break that can renew and inspire us, can take us to this marvelously wild and enchanting world where children touch us, angels amaze us, bright stars lead us.

Yet the Christmas of the Bible doesn't leave us there. Actually, it doesn't let us stay there for very long. Quickly, you and I are thrown back into the real world, a world of deep suffering and pain. Truthfully, I love the Christmas season: the annual Christmas letter, time with family, the annual Christmas party, the Christmas music—"Frosted window panes," "Chestnuts roasting on an open fire," "Jesus, my Jesus, what a wonderful child!" But the story of Jesus' birth has more to offer to us than that. And Matthew today makes that quite clear.

Today we are thrown into the brutal story of the escape to Egypt, the slaughter of the innocents, and the return from Egypt. Wow!! We haven't been given much time to bask in the glow of the calm, silent night of Christmas Eve. We're now dealing with paranoid leaders who force a little-known family to travel all over kingdom come. Jesus, the wonderful child, already has his opposition poised to destroy him.

Matthew, as he communicates this reality, tells the story in such a way to make it quite clear that what Jesus and his family are up to mimics what happened to Israel in the past. The Jesus story here is a recapitulation of the history of Israel. Jesus survives assassination, as did Moses. Jesus goes to Egypt, as his people once did, and comes out of Egypt, as his people did as well. Jesus was harassed by Herod, as Moses was harassed by Pharaoh. Rachel, the mother of the nation, is in many ways Jesus' mother, too, mourning over the community's great losses, in this case, the loss of the male babies of Bethlehem. What

Jesus and family are experiencing is what Israel experienced in its history as well. It's déjà vu all over again.

Many of us would probably like to remain in the sweetness, the sentimentality, the innocence of Christmas Eve, or at least what we and the culture assume that Christmas Eve is all about. But the Bible is honest, remarkably so. It takes us to real life. Religion at its best is not escapism, although it often takes on that role. Frankly, from my estimation, it appears to me that sometimes in our culture the communities of faith that prosper the most are those that don't deal with the hard stuff, those that always want to give people a perpetual shot in the arm, those that aren't willing to ask the tough questions, especially of God. But Biblical faith seems to be willing to go where much contemporary religion appears unwilling to go.

I like what Nadia Bolz-Weber has to say about our brutal story today:

The Epiphany story of Herod and infanticide reveals a God who has entered our world as it actually exists, and not the world as we often wish it would be. God's love is too pure not to enter into a world that does not exist, even though this is often how we treat Jesus, like we are trying to shelter him from reality. We often behave as though Jesus is only interested in saving and loving a romanticized version of ourselves, or an idealized version of our mess of a world, and so we offer to him a version of our best selves. With our Sunday school shoes on, we sing songs about kings and drummers at his birth, perhaps so that we can escape the Herod in ourselves and in the world around us. But we've lost the plot [of the Christmas] story if we use religion as the place where we escape from difficult realities instead of as the place where those difficult realities are given meaning.

Sadly, Herod is real. He showed up in the Pharaoh. He showed up in Jesus' time as a murderer of his two sons and of the entire Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council. There doesn't seem to be any historical validation that he ordered the slaughter of two-year old boys

around Bethlehem, but frankly it is the kind of the things he would have done.

Herod is real. He shows up all the time. He showed up in Hitler, Idi Amin, Stalin, and I am afraid, Basher Al-Assad from Syria. Herod shows up all the time. He shows up in men who physically abuse their partners, men and women who misuse children, in pimps who market people in the sex trade. He shows up in power mongers, who often are so insecure in themselves that they have to assert control to keep things under control. I mean, think about it. It's almost comical, if it weren't so sad. Big old bossy Herod, who has all kinds of weapons and people of power and authority at his fingertips, is threatened by the birth of a baby—so threatened that he must manipulate some traveling magicians, astrologers, to get information from them where the baby can be found. This guy is paranoid. A little baby has gotten him all worked up. It's tragic, but it is the tragedy of real life, real history.

And the good news that the church has to proclaim is not that the tragedy of history is not real, or not as bad as it seems. We're willing to tell the truth. That is why we want to keep Herod in Christmas, as much as Christ in Christmas. The good news we have to proclaim is that life as we really know it is penetrated by a God who is willing to endure the messiness of it all. Again, listen to what Nadia Bolz-Weber has to say:

God did not enter the world of our nostalgic, silent-night, snow-blanketed, peace-on-earth, suspended reality of Christmas. God slipped into the vulnerability of skin and entered our violent and disturbing world.

Our God doesn't run from the real and the ugly, and if you don't believe that, look at what the paranoid opposition to Jesus and his movement of love and compassion did to this movement's leader. They hung him on a cross. They did what many power-hungry-yet-phenomenally-insecure folks do to love. They tried to do away with it. They crucified it. Now, as you know, our story suggests that they didn't win the day. But that is for another day, another season, although

admittedly, honestly, that truth is the truth we proclaim in and out of every season. In the end, love and compassion cannot be blotted out, even if the power mongers try to do so. A dead body will give way to life. Death will become resurrection.

But I don't want to say that in such a way that makes you want to diminish the hardness of living. The story of Herod won't allow us to do so. It's a tough world. It's a tough life. And God is in the midst of it all, which means that this faith stuff is not an invitation to escape it all, but rather a call to be discovered by God in the midst of it all, especially in the midst of the suffering and pain of the world.

Again, I turn to Nadia to help us understand the role of religion and faith in a Herod-dominated world:

It's like if you were stuck in a subway tunnel during a sudden blackout. You can respond to the fear and darkness either by using the remaining battery on your cell phone to entertain yourself with Candy Crush or by using that phone as a light to see others around you, to see the contours of your environment, and maybe even to walk toward a light source more reliable and powerful than your own.

It's a real world we are facing today. As our theme for today suggests, the struggles remain. But the light shines in the darkness. And we who trust the Jesus' story will cling to that light, even when Herod tries to extinguish it. We will cling to it, not in a way that hoards it for ourselves, but in a way that paves the way for us to the needs and hurts of others and in a way that enables us *together* to be found by a light that is much more reliable and powerful than our own.