

Sermon for Sunday, January 1, 2017

REALITY CHECK

I doubt that you have ever heard a sermon a week after Christmas on Herod's slaughter of the innocents. It seems insensitive to reflect upon such dark and evil deeds while the baby Jesus is still shedding fresh light upon our cynical hearts. So most preachers shy away from this text, which Matthew so carefully weaves into the birth narrative, choosing instead some other passage of scripture to vainly extend those good Christmas feelings another week. It doesn't work though. Because reality is just too invasive. Christmas, if we are fortunate, lasts a day. Then it's off to the store to make exchanges or take in a movie, back to the desk to write checks and pay the bills, back to cleaning up the mess of wrapping paper and dirty dishes, and back to work.

Matthew's appalling story of how Jesus' birth was followed by the slaughter of the innocents, is intended to be a cold slap in the face. It's a reality check. After revealing to us the wondrous, angelic, and miraculous intervention by God into history through the birth of Jesus Christ, Matthew reminds us immediately of the world he has come to save, and the powers he has come to displace, the dark powers that preserve their reign at the expense of justice and human life. The contrast couldn't be more stark.

Herod, the soldiers, the massacre of innocent children cast a grim shadow over our Christmas joy, the shadow of reality. It's a reality of violence, death, and tragedy in which we still live. How can we shut our minds to the horrors of Aleppo, and the suffering of the children there? How can we forget the young girls in Nigeria, or the misery of the children of Haiti? Herod's henchmen are still at work in our world, sowing death and sorrow. Reality still needs conversion from the evil to the good. Humanity still needs a change of heart; we need a savior, who is Christ, the Lord.

The power to change our hearts; that is the awesome power that God wields in Jesus Christ. Compared to Herod's power, to amass troops and weapons, to control life and death, to strike fear and terror into the heart, Christ's power seems weak and paltry. It's very first display is to flee to Egypt, to be a passive object rather than the active subject of history. Even later, when compared to the powers that be, the King of kings will seem humble and impotent, just another victim like us. But in fact, as Matthew shows us, God's will and purpose from the very beginning of Jesus' birth dominates the entire course of events. God is in the world, joining reality, to diffuse the violence, to deescalate the warfare, to wipe away the tears, with the only power that can convert the hearts of darkness—the power of suffering love.

In the 1964 movie, "Parable," which tells the gospel of Jesus Christ within the context of a circus of nations, there is a man like Herod, who represents the powers that be. He is Magnus the Magnificent, to whom the whole circus family bows obeisance. His act, is to manipulate from the comfort of his ornate throne, human marionettes lifted to the top of the main tent by ropes and harnesses. There he reenacts as entertainment, a soldier's killing of an infant in the arms of its mother.

Silently observing the tragedy is the circus clown, all dressed in white, who sees not only the injustice of the story itself, but the suffering of the human marionettes. He moves quickly to lower the human marionettes from their helpless perch and releases them from their harnesses. Magnus the Magnificent is furious. He insists that the clown be harnessed in their stead, and lifting him aloft, he kills him. The powers that be are victorious. The agent of suffering love has been destroyed.

But the power of suffering love has not been defeated. Magnus can't live with himself. His hardened heart is broken by the witness of this innocent clown. In a moment of clarity, he sees himself in the mirror of his dressing room for what he really is, and then begins to cover his face with white makeup. The clown is resurrected and God's love, is incarnate again.

The child of Bethlehem grew up to show God's purpose of love for all us children, in all its fullness. On the cross he aligned himself in solidarity with all who suffer, to affirm on the morning of the resurrection that love cannot be defeated. He shows us, that acting in love and in solidarity with those who suffer, we find the power to foil the plans of evil, we find the power to change the world by transforming the human heart. That power, is God with us, consoling us, sustaining us, guiding us, and saving us.

We cannot forget that we celebrate Christmas in the midst of a cruel world, where human beings are mercilessly manipulated by uncaring powers of human origin. We dare not enjoy this religious observance cut off from the real world. Because it is the real world into which Christ came, and it is the real world in which his disciples are called to minister. When we, like Joseph, pay attention to God's call, catch the vision of God's kingdom, and in faith obediently follow the dream that God reveals to us, we become an integral part of the great unfolding of God's plan.

There is an old rabbinical story about a man who left the village of his birth and set out to find the city of his dreams, where all was bright and perfect. After a day's walk he lay down to rest the night in a forest. Before going to sleep though, he removed his shoes and placed them carefully on the path, pointing them in the direction of his journey toward the magical city.

While he slept, a practical joker happened by and turned his shoes around so they pointed in the direction of the village he had left behind.

The next morning, when the traveler awoke, he put on his shoes and headed down the path in the direction his shoes were pointing. He walked all day, and at dusk saw in the distance the city of his dreams. It looked strangely familiar and much smaller than he had imagined it would be. As he entered the village, he discovered a street very much like his own, knocked on the door of a house exactly like the one he had left, and was warmly received by the family inside—his family, of course. With that, the man lived happily ever after in the city of his dreams.

Christmas is like a dream. It lifts us to new heights of hope and carries us to a promised land of light and peace, of joy and freedom, and of love and acceptance. And like the infant Jesus in Egypt, we live there for a bit enjoying the sights and sounds, the gifts and the fellowship, and the pure wonder of it all. Then one night, God turns our shoes around and points them back to where we came from. But the dream, is not forgotten.

To live the dream, in the midst of a cruel and too often heartless reality, is the challenge and the opportunity that stretches before us. To live the dream, is to follow the Christ, God with us now and always.

In the birth of Christ, we celebrate with each other and with churches throughout the earth, a dream of the kingdom of God, where all are loved and respected, where the lion lies down with the lamb, and where every tear is wiped away. Matthew, inspired by God, has turned our shoes around, that we may return home fortified by the dream, sustained by God's presence, fulfilling God's plan to incarnate the awesome and transforming power of suffering love. Glory to God in the highest, for this inexpressible gift!

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Matthew 2:13-23