

The Dark Side of Christmas

Scripture: Matthew 2:13-23

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Morning Service**

People of God: In an episode of the old TV series M*A*S*H, two doctors and a nurse desperately try to keep a fatally wounded soldier from dying on Christmas Day. They didn't want the man's wife and children back home to forever associate Christmas with the death of their father. So they tried whatever they could to slow down the dying process. They knew they couldn't save him. They just didn't want him to die on Christmas Day. Despite their best efforts the man died twenty minutes before midnight. Then Dr. Pierce moved the clock forward and wrote down "December 26" on the death certificate, saying "No child should have to connect Christmas with death."

I'd think we'd all agree with that sentiment. Death and Christmas do not belong together. They seem like polar opposites. Death, especially tragic death is at odds with the joyous and festive atmosphere of Christmas. Christmas is the time when families should be able to get together for fun, not in sorrow. And so when we hear about stories like the boy who drowned in the Rideau river this week, we think that is even more tragic because it happened at Christmas time. We don't like death at Christmas.

Someone should have told Herod.

The story of the wise men is often told and sung about at Christmas. There are many songs in our hymnbook that reflect the first 12 verses of this chapter. But when events turn deadly, the songs come to an end. The ending of the appearance of the Wise Men is often overlooked and unread during the traditional lessons and carols service.

Who wants to hear about the "Slaughter of the Innocents", as this passage is often called? This passage is about as un-Christmassy a passage as you could imagine. Yet, here it is. Heard the day after Christmas. What a party buster.

But maybe there is something very important that we need to hear in this passage—however difficult and troubling it might be. There is a dark side of Christmas. We cannot avoid this dark side of Christmas. Not if we want to really understand the meaning of Christmas. Nor would it good for us to overlook or downplay this dark side. Instead, by openly acknowledging it, we can come to terms with the dark side of life that we so often experience.

Despite the overall joyful message of Christmas, Christmas also involves suffering and humiliation. Christmas leads to a violent reaction. That's the dark side of Christmas. And while it is most evident in our text for this morning, it was already there, the moment Jesus was born.

After all, for Jesus his birth was the first step in his humiliation and suffering. The first step that would lead to his death on the cross. While we rightly celebrate his birth as good news, for Jesus himself, his birth was a step downwards. After all, he left the glory and majesty of heaven behind to become like one of us. Paul expresses it this way in Philippians 2:6

Jesus, who being in the very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.

I don't know whether we can fully grasp what this meant. The Second Person of the Trinity, the one through whom the creation was made, was confined by his human nature. Was confined by becoming a baby. So that the One who eventually would say to the storms, "Be Still" could only express himself through his cries. The One who would touch the leper and bring healing could only depend upon the care of his parents. For Jesus, his birth in our sin-infested, evil-plagued, death-filled world, was a step in his humiliation.

Even the place where Jesus was born was a small indication of this. There was no room in the inn. So in the back of the stable Jesus was born. With a manger as his bed. I know the farmers here try to keep their barns clean, but still barns stink. If there was a manger, there must have animals. And if there were animals, there must have been manure, somewhere around. The hayloft might not be too bad, but still it's no place to give birth, especially not to the Savior of the world.

If the dark side of Christmas is not usually noticed in our typical Christmas services, it becomes unavoidable in the conclusion of the story of the wise men. Here death and weeping, rather rejoicing and merriment are the result of Jesus' birth. Here Jesus encounters opposition from the forces opposed to God and his plan of salvation.

That's the dark side of Christmas. Not everyone is happy with the birth of the Messiah. Some are downright hostile and violent to the coming of the Messiah. While few would ever object to celebrating the birthday of a baby, questions, even opposition soon arises when claims are made about this baby, like the claim that he is Savior of the world; that He is the Messiah, the Lord; that He is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

In this passage, the opposition is spearheaded by King Herod. Yesterday, when we considered the first part of this passage, we discovered that Herod was greatly disturbed by the question of the Wise Men: Who is he born king of the Jews? Herod was a ruthless ruler, who held on to power, through whatever means necessary. Even if that meant killing his brother-in-law, his uncle, wife, and even three of his sons.

As a result, the order to kill the children of Bethlehem was fully in keeping with what we know about Herod. Scholars have estimated that the number of children killed to be around twenty. Though small in numbers compared to the massacres we have witnessed in recent years—the massacre here is no less cruel, no less brutal, and no less unjust. Innocent children are killed because of the birth of Jesus.

It reveals the dark side of Christmas. There are those who are opposed to God's plan of redemption that centers upon Jesus Christ. Sometimes such opposition is merely vocal; other times it becomes violent.

Herod's order reveals the hardness of the heart caused by sin. It is precisely that problem of sin that Jesus came to undo. Jesus came to bring forgiveness, healing and wholeness to the brokenness of this world. Was that really a threat to Herod? Well, not directly. Jesus never tried to seize power and become an earthly king. As Jesus tried explained to Pilate and then to another Herod—the son of this one—his was not an earthly kingdom.

But the kingdom of God that Jesus spoke about was indeed a threat to the ways of Herod. The kingdom of God is about justice and righteousness, rather than clinging to power through brute force. The kingdom is about lifting up the humble and watching out the poor rather than looking out for oneself. The kingdom of God is about following the will of God, as revealed in the pages of Scripture, rather than following our own sinful desires. This kingdom of God was indeed a threat to the way Herod and his kind want to run the world.

Herod wasn't the first to oppose God and his plan of salvation. In the OT, the stories of Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar tell of similar attempts to stop God from fulfilling his purposes. Nor would Herod be the last. Jesus' ministry is full of stories of opposition. It would to his death on the cross.

For you see, Christmas and the cross are not opposites. Christmas leads to the cross. Jesus was born to undo the effects of sin. This path to the cross would involve suffering. It began for Jesus the moment he was born. And so in addition to all the songs of praise, we also need to hear these words of lament:

A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning,
Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted,
because they are no more.

Matthew, here, quotes from the prophet Jeremiah. Originally these words were used to describe the sadness experienced by God's people when they were sent into exile. Ramah was a town just north of Jerusalem, a town where God's people had to go through on their way to exile in Babylon. Rachel was one of the wives of Jacob and became a symbolic mother for God's people. And so, Jeremiah pictures the mother Rachel weeping because of the tragic end of her people.

Now Matthew applies that passage to what happened in Bethlehem. Rachel, mother of the nation, once again weeps for the loss of her children. This time for the children of Bethlehem. It's a tragic scene that no amount of candy cane can sweeten the scene.

Have I ruined Christmas for you? Has this passage put a damper on the Christmas spirit? Last Sunday night I didn't preach on the Book of Numbers but turned to Micah because dealing with trouble in the wilderness didn't seem appropriate for the week of Christmas. Yet here we have BIG trouble and it's due to the birth of Jesus. What a turn of events. Does this passage ruin Christmas for you?

Many of us still have Christmas family gatherings to attend. The celebrations are not yet over. The Christmas tree, with its beautiful decorations is still up. The Christmas cards expressing the joy and blessings of the season are still on the shelf. I still want to sing, "Joy to the World". But how can I, knowing the dark side of Christmas? How can I with this ugly little story staring me in the face?

Because it precisely the existence of this dark side that Jesus was born into the world in order to reverse it. It is because there are the "Herods" in our world that we needed Jesus to be born to become a king in a completely un-Herod like way. It is precisely because this world is like a stinky, shit-covered barn that Jesus had to come in order to clean up the mess.

Christmas can be celebrated with great gusto, not because everything is good in the world, but because there is something fundamentally wrong in the world and Jesus came to undo it. Jesus came so that the Rachel's of this

world will no longer weep for her children, so that the Herod of this world will no longer terrorize people.

And so the Christmas story—the biblical Christmas story is realistic about the state of humanity. It doesn't cover up the tragedies of the world. Instead, it faces it head on. It knows there is a dark side to the story of humanity. As a result, it can offer true, lasting hope that gets beyond the artificial sentimentality of the season. A sentimentality that is quickly dispensed with after Christmas, or torn apart when tragedy hits.

But when we face up to the dark side of Christmas—when we face up to the sin and sorrow that stains the world, when we encounter the effects of the curse—then we can turn to Jesus as the one who will overturn the curse and we can experience the blessings of the Lord in our lives and in our world. And then, even in the face of tragedy or hardship, we can in faith and in boldness sing, “Joy to the World.” Amen.