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Sermon for December 29, 2013

First Sunday After Christmas
Year A

Scripture Text: Matthew 2:13-23

Daring to See Things as They Are: Daring to Affirm that God Is Working

Susanna and Jehoiachim were young parents, both twenty-three years old, just getting started in life together. They had one child, little Davey, who at eighteen months had learned to walk and was getting into everything, was putting sentences together in strange ways, his soft, high-pitched little voice giving a musical lilt even to the Aramaic gutturals. A healthy, happy child, he was the delight of their life. They named him David because they lived in the “city of David,” as their village was called, located a few miles south of Jerusalem.

Late one night while everyone was sleeping, the king’s soldiers surrounded the village, and at first light they came into town. They ordered all parents with small children into the village square, made a search to ensure that none remained, and without a word killed every boy younger than two years old. “Orders,” they said.

After the horror of that day had receded enough for the villagers to take account, they discovered that twenty-one children had been killed. It is a cruel world, and such things happen. But human beings are resilient creatures, and after periods of numbness, anger, bitterness, and acceptance, Jehoiachim and Susanna were able to pick up the pieces of their life and go on. Without hostility or condescension, they rejected the “explanations” of the tragedy from well-meaning neighbor-theologians, having no answer to the question articulated for them in their own Bible-prayer book, “My God, my God, why?” They even began to find new meaning in synagogue worship.

Until one day when they discovered that on the crucial night before the slaughter of the baby boys an angel had come from God to warn one family to flee. It turns out that God had arranged for Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus to escape and that they had been secure in Egypt. The little boy Jesus was alive and well, but not their little Davey.¹

Not the story, I suspect that you expected to hear on this first Sunday after Christmas and certainly not the story of the birth of Jesus that comes to mind at this time of year. Rather, we are far more familiar, and I dare say more comfortable, with the story that begins with the angel

announcing the good news to Mary who then, with her soon to be husband Joseph, travels to the city of Bethlehem where she gives birth to an infant son in a stable and lays him in a manger where during the stillness of that holy night they are visited by shepherds who were told of this great event by a choir of angels announcing the birth of the Christ Child and then concludes with Mary quietly pondering all that had occurred in her heart. It is that peaceful and gentle story that we tell and share; full of the magic of Christmas, full of the hope for a new beginning that will usher in the time of peace and wholeness that we all dream about and yearn for.

Yet in the Gospel of Matthew, there are no choirs of angels, no shepherds seeking the Christ Child in a lowly manger; only a star, the mention of some pagan magicians who noticed that star and traveled to see the one it pointed to, a nervous despotic and cruel puppet ruler who would and did go to any length to maintain his power base and a family with a child who are warned by God to leave Bethlehem before the ruler's army can carry out an awful order to kill every male child under the age of two.

In and of itself, the story of the birth of Jesus, as told by the writer of the Gospel of Matthew, is not a very pleasant story. For, if one pauses for even a moment, especially after hearing the story told from the perspective of a set of parents who were not warned on that horrific night, it dredges up all sorts of unanswered and unanswerable questions. Why would an all powerful and all loving God not warn all of the residents of the town? Why didn't Joseph and Mary take the few seconds needed to warn, at least, their neighbors so that others could escape as well? How could the God whose son was called the Prince of Peace let such violence happen?

It is enough, I would suggest, to make any person with even the tiniest bit of compassion in their soul recoil in horror at the thought. Did God create this tragedy or simply not prevent it? And either way is this the kind of God you want to worship?

This is the kind of trap that one can fall into and possibly never get out of, when one looks at this narrative in the Gospel of Matthew and reads and considers it as if it was some objective news story being reported on the evening news. For to do so pulls this story out of the overall theological context of the Gospel of Matthew and in so doing mischaracterizes the intent of the story and misunderstands the reason for its telling. For the purpose of this story, as horrible as it is, is not to tell what happened in the early years of Jesus' life but to reveal something about how God works as seen through the eyes of the writer of the Gospel of Matthew.

As we have seen in several of the Gospel lessons from Matthew during the season of Advent, the overall theological thrust of this gospel is to proclaim that God is God and that God, regardless of our human desires and ideas about what is just or fair, will act in and through human history in ways that reveal a different view. Rather than sweeping in with righteous indignation and wiping out all that is evil and horrible in the world, Messiah comes and heals the sick and cares for the broken hearted. Rather than riding into Jerusalem on a mighty warhorse surrounded by a legions of divine warriors, Messiah comes into the holy city on the back of a donkey to the shouts of a small band of followers. Rather than wiping out all those who would oppose him, all those who tortured him and all those who sought to kill him, Messiah prays for, forgives, heals and ultimately dies for all whether follower or foe. Rather than leveling the earth and all of its inhabitants out of anger and despair for how the world treated the beloved son and how the world

killed Messiah, God acts to raise Messiah from death thus showing the world that nothing will prevent God from loving, caring for, and ultimately restoring the world.

The reality of this world, right here and now as it was at the time of the birth of Messiah, is that evil things happen. Innocent people whether child or adult are hurt, abused and even killed and others, innocent or not, are spared. And we, as people of faith, are called upon to make sense of that which is impossible to make sense of, because the question posed, often, is why did God allow such a thing to happen when what we need to ask and wrestle with is where do we see God active even in the midst the evil and tragedy that seems to overwhelm the world?

In the midst of a tragic event, as told only in the Gospel of Matthew, God was active in making sure that Messiah would have the opportunity to proclaim the good news of God's love for all in spite of the desires of a fearful and paranoid ruler who would rather kill a city full of children than be open to the possibility that God's love is meant to be celebrated and shared. You see, the power of this story is the unflinching clarity with which it portrays the worst of human activity while at the very same time proclaiming that this is neither the vision that God has for the world nor is it the ultimate conclusion to how God, through Messiah, will relate to, engage with and reconcile all of the world to God. Therefore, the message for us right here and now as it was for those who first heard this Gospel is nothing less than dare to see things as they are and in so doing dare to affirm that in spite of what the world may say, in spite of what others may proclaim, and even in spite of our own inability to clearly articulate God has, God is and God will always be active, present and working so that in the end all of creation will be made whole as God intended from the very dawn of creation.

Amen.

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ⁱ M. Eugene Boring; "The Gospel of Matthew" in *the New Interpreter's Bible Electronic Edition*, 2002, P. 148