

Matthew 2:13-23

2nd Sunday after Christmas, Jan. 5, 2014

“God’s protective presence in a violent world”

The cookies are eaten, holiday guests have left, and it’s time to take down the decorations. We are done with Christmas. Or are we? This calendar year there are two Sundays after Christmas before the Epiphany – we have an unusual opportunity to say, ‘not so fast.’ There is an important part of the Christmas story we have not yet considered.

The story raises a difficult topic not often preached on, so this is a longer than usual homily. Please try to stay with me here.

This Christmas story which appears only in Matthew, is about the Holy Family’s flight to Egypt to save the baby Jesus from certain death at the hand of King Herod. It is harsh and uncomfortable, in sharp counterpoint to the idyllic Christmas readings from Luke – the trumpeting of angels, the shepherds, the adoring animals.

Matthew’s narrative unfolds in three parts: the flight to Egypt, Herod’s slaughter of the infants, and the return from Egypt. Our common lectionary omits much of the middle part – as it often omits passages depicting violence and difficult text. Let me read the graphic mid-section to you. [Matt. 2:16-18]

What message is conveyed in this passage about the coming of the Christ into the world?

After the magi visit the infant Jesus, Joseph has three dreams. Dreams were understood to be a means of revelation or divine guidance. However much Joseph’s dreams sound like nightmares to us, the dreams underscore the narrative intent to demonstrate that God’s actions initiate what happens.

The angel comes with an urgent message to flee Herod’s rage. The birth story swiftly turns from the magi’s gifts to a panicked flight to save their child. The cost of the Messiah’s birth is paid by the lives of the innocent children of Bethlehem. God’s coming into the world was not in peaceful poverty, or kingly splendor, but born of brutal violence among the very people he comes to save.

A second dream tells Joseph when Herod dies and it is safe to return to Judea. As the Holy Family heads home, Joseph hears that Herod’s son Archelaus is now ruling Judea – Archelaus was known for cruelty. This bad news is confirmed by the angel in Joseph’s third dream; the angel directs the Holy Family further north to Galilee.

There is no homecoming to Judea; the Holy Family becomes a refugee family, fleeing violence and searching for a safe place to raise the holy child. What happened to the gifts, the adoration,

the recognition of kingship, the promise of peace? All are repressed in the darkness of living on the edge, a survival existence. A story that surely resonates with Christians in the mid-east now.

The geographic movement of Matthew's story explains how the infant Jesus, born in Bethlehem, came to grow up in Nazareth. It is an alternate to Luke's birth narrative, which says that a census ordered 'when Quirinius was governor of Syria,' explains how Joseph and Mary, who lived in Nazareth, came to be in Bethlehem when the birth of Jesus occurred.

Neither gospel scenario is supported by historical evidence. Quirinius did not become governor until 6 CE; Herod may have commanded a census in the year 9 BCE. Neither date matches Luke's story.

There is also a question whether Matthew's reported slaughter of the infants at Bethlehem actually occurred. But, Matthew's story of the slaughter at Bethlehem is consistent with what is known about Herod's character. Herod the Great, who ruled Judea from 37 to 4 BCE, was a cruel man. Suspecting intrigue in his own family, he killed his wife and one of his sons. Shortly before he died, he commanded that political prisoners be killed so that there would be mourning throughout the land at the time of his own death.

The synoptic gospel authors – whom tradition names Matthew, Mark and Luke – do not claim divine dictation in the writing of the gospels; indeed, Luke writes that his intent is to provide an orderly account. Each Gospel writer has a unique approach to story-telling and theological focus.

In addition to explaining why the Holy Family ended up in Nazareth, Matthew uses the flight to Egypt to introduce Jesus as the new Moses: the new and final lawgiver.

Throughout his Gospel, Matthew bombards us with "fulfillment" citations: examples of how Jesus' life and teachings fulfilled the Hebrew Scriptures. In that sense, Matthew's Gospel functions as a bridge between the old and new testaments. The person and ministry of Jesus is a continuation, an amplification of God's law expressed in the Hebrew Scripture, and not a rejection or break with what has gone before.

Through the literary form of fulfillment citations, Matthew makes his point that the revelation of God in Christ sheds new light on the Hebrew Scripture; for Matthew, 'proper' interpretation of Scripture is guided by the life and teachings of Jesus.

In today's passage, there are fulfillment citations to the prophets Hosea and Jeremiah, and a conflation of citations from Isaiah and Judges. Herod's action recalls the command of the King of Egypt in Exodus 1:16 to kill the Hebrew boy children. The Holy Family's departure from Egypt evokes the exodus under Moses' leadership.

By interpreting Jesus in the context of Israel's past and hoped for future, Matthew underscores

his thesis that God's actions initiate human activity.

There is something deeply disquieting about the notion of *God as initiator* in a world of violence and repression. Here, God's action, coming into the world incarnate, precipitates the death of innocent children. How do we reconcile that violence with the gospel of God's love, grace, and forgiveness given us in Jesus Christ? Where and how do we *separate* God's role as initiator from the tragedy that follows?

Jerome F. D. Creach (an Old Testament theologian) writes in his Oct. 2013 book *Violence in Scripture*:

Much of the Bible's description of violence and destruction is related directly to God's desire to maintain the proper order in creation. Furthermore, what is often understood as God's violence is actually God acting to protect the creation itself or the creation, following the will of God, rising up in rebellion against those who would ruin it.

Certainly, the coming of God to live among us at a time of great violence and unrest in the world is understandable as God acting to protect creation. That God acts through dreams to prevent the child Jesus' death protects creation and god-self.

But why then, the death of the innocent children? Could not the angel have warned *their* parents to flee also?

Matthew's story confronts us with the presence of evil in the world. We have a strong human desire to understand God as omnipotent, all powerful. We struggle with the question of why God does not intervene in wars, pogroms and other horrific events of our world experience. *Why do bad things happen to good people?* we say. Why were innocent children slaughtered?

I think the angels' fore-knowledge of the children's deaths – which we hear as *God's* knowledge – troubles us as much as their innocence.

The Hebrew Scripture is filled with violence and God's intervention: the imprecatory Psalms petition for vengeance on the psalmist's adversaries – passionate cries for divine justice, here and now. Consider the Sodom narrative, or the Pharaoh at the Red Sea. Violence was then, as it is now, a reality, the human experience. In the Hebrew Scripture, God is often depicted as the *initiator* of violence *on behalf of* the people of Israel.

The reality of a violent world and this Hebrew understanding of God as initiator of human activity is brought into Matthew's nativity narrative. There is also this: in the face of destructive violence, God offers protection.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggeman suggests that our current inclination to interpret away the divine violence in scripture is something of a cop-out – we are refusing to struggle with the

deep complexity of the character of God. When God is disclosed as an agent of violence in a scriptural text, we ought at least be troubled – and perhaps not in such a hurry to respond to reading of these texts with “*thanks be to God.*” (*The Christian Century*, Dec. 2013).

Brueggeman poses this question: Are we made in the image of a God who struggles with violence?

Jesus taught non-violence, yet he cursed the fig tree and overturned the tables of the money-changers in the Temple in an aggressive demonstration of God’s condemnation. (Mark 11)

If we are made in the image of a God whose God-self struggles with violence, what might we draw from that possibility? If a propensity to violence is our natural human state, that certainly brings into focus *our* need for self-control, for careful exercise of verbal and physical strength.

There is both warning and affirmation here: even when *we* are at our worst, God is working with us. We are not abandoned, our struggle is understood.

Still, when we talk about God’s character, we must be careful to remember we are made in God’s image, and not the other way around. God is not made in our image.

We cannot answer the questions about violence – God’s, ours, the world’s– raised by this passage from Matthew. But the questions are there, and we must not ignore them.

Matthew’s Gospel depicts evil as a real and present force. Matthew writes that all Israel, symbolized by Rachel as mother of the 12 tribes, weeps at Herod’s evil-doing. Matthew’s story of the angels directing the flight and return of the Holy Family makes the point that God is present even when the powers of evil appear to be succeeding.

We, too, need God’s protective presence in our darkness.

Herod’s violence at Jesus’s birth foreshadows the violence that will lead to the crucifixion. By his Resurrection, Jesus will be delivered from death, from the worst that human violence can do. That’s good news.

Particularly at Christmas, we need to be reminded that we celebrate the presence and love of God *in a violent world.*

I will turn their mourning into joy, I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow...says the Lord, speaking through the prophet Jeremiah. God’s abiding presence is confirmed in the incarnation.

We do not yet experience the fullness of the peace and harmony of God’s Kingdom intent, the peace promised through God’s prophets. We have work to do.

We are, at times, intentionally unaware or ignorant of the depth of violence, the innocence of its victims – we turn off the tv, or set aside the news about Egypt, suicide bombings, the forcible expulsion of Palestinians from Israeli settlements. We don't want to hear about it. It threatens our internal peace.

Willful ignorance: There are no gangs in Anacortes, no homeless children sleeping in dumpsters, no drug problems in *our* schools. Really?

This pretense of *unawareness*, or looking the other way, is the antithesis of Jesus' teachings about Kingdom. Matthew insists we look at the reality. However we define evil, we must grapple with those evil forces in our world and not ignore them.

Seeking to be and do better, to assist in bringing the Kingdom to its fullness, requires recognition of the evil around us and within ourselves. Struggling to control violence within ourselves – is a part of that. Seeking to be and do better as community by refusing to tolerate societal violence – is a part of that.

As to the violence in Scripture – when we ignore it by refusing to read it or we explain it away, if it ceases to trouble our thoughts or to provoke our dialogue, we risk losing sight of the essential message of God's incarnation: grace, love and forgiveness.

Amen

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