

“The Third Day of Christmas”

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Matthew 2:13-23

Today, our story may or may not be out of sequence. Our liturgical cycle celebrates Epiphany, the arrival of the Magi, on January 6<sup>th</sup>, and we assume that the flight of the Holy Family to Egypt follows afterward. In reality, we do not know the actual date of Jesus’ birth, or the time the Magi arrived or exactly when, Joseph took his family and fled from Herod. What is important for us to understand is that Jesus was born, not into a perfect, fairy tale world, but rather, he was born to save a world brutal and hurting, in need of a Savior.

Matthew 2: 13-23

On this third day of Christmas, the Sunday between Christmas and New Year’s Day—a week before Epiphany and the arrival of the Magi—Matthew tells us a story we don’t want to hear. The gospel message on either side of today, talk of the birth of Jesus and the adoration of the people who were invited to experience the event: last week, the shepherds; next week, the kings.

On this third day of Christmas, we’d rather be enjoying the comfort and joy of family and friends, feasts and presents, carols and candles. Instead, Matthew has us look at the hard reality of what the incarnation really means. God’s coming to us in the form of a perfectly formed infant with devoted mother and step-father at her side in a cute little stable with cuddly animals is the Christmas of Hallmark and fairy tales. It is a sanitized Christmas scene of our own invention. In it we never hear the threats and scorn of the people at Mary, the unmarried; we never heard her labor cries; smelled the stench of the stable; felt Joseph’s desperate search for food and shelter. We fail to take into account how the reigning King of Israel would feel about claims against his throne.

If we’d known the paranoid, vengeful King Herod, we would have tried to quiet the angels, silence the shepherds, and chase away the astrologers. We would have done whatever we could to hush up the birth in order to protect the child and his family.

We see, in our mind’s eye, the peaceful village of Bethlehem we invoke when we sing the carol or pick out greeting cards. We fail to see the actual place of Bethlehem, then or now. An occupied city—then a village outside Jerusalem occupied by the Roman army—now, a shattered city destroyed by a wall to clearly divide Palestinians and Israelis, where armed soldiers and trained guerillas engage in combat—and women and children die in the streets. All we need to do is look at the pictures in the newspapers or on the evening news to see, if we really want to see what the world is really like.

When I was in Bethlehem in 1994, there was fighting in Bethlehem. Manger Square, where the Church of the Nativity is, was filled with armed soldiers—littered with rocks, tear gas canisters and debris. Tourists were ordered out of the city. My friends and I had been in the Church of the Nativity, a Greek Orthodox Church, a Crusader church

with sections dating back to the 4<sup>th</sup> century. We had been in the basement grotto, “the traditional site of Jesus’ birth”, singing Christmas carols—caught up in a collective religious moment indescribable and profound—when a priest came to tell us that the soldiers were ordering us to leave. As we boarded our tour bus, we could see truckload after truckload of Israeli soldiers pour into Manger Square. One of the women on our bus said, “It’s too bad the soldiers had to come and ruin it. It must have been peaceful back when Jesus was born.”

I turned, looked at her and said, “But this is exactly how it was when Jesus was born. Remember the Roman 10<sup>th</sup> Legion and Herod’s Palace Guard? It wasn’t any quieter or safer then.”

If the incarnation is to have any meaning or lasting value for us—it has to connect with the real world. Jesus was born into a real world where powerful men murdered children to secure their own power and place in society. We live in that same world. We cannot escape for very long from the realities of our world. We can list country after country, place after place, where powerful rulers have oppressed and often slaughtered thousands of people: in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, South America, Communist Russia, Nazi Germany, Bosnia, Afghanistan, and New York City.

It would be so easy to tune all this violence out or to blame God for all the bloodshed and pain. But God does not condone the wholesale slaughter of the innocent—not then, not now--that is a very human invention.

Jesus was born into a fallen world to bring us back to God, to remind us that God is with us in our joys, but especially in our sorrows. God wants us to help change the world for the better—to be part of the solution, not part of the problem.

Until September 11<sup>th</sup>, most of the violence we heard about happened to someone else, somewhere else. All that has changed, and we now live in a world that has been changed by the effects of terrorism. For the first time we see that the world is indeed a global village where the problems of our neighbors are really our own. The plight of those fleeing from violence and hostility is our own plight.

Joseph took his family to Egypt to find temporary safety. He had to look to foreigners to help protect his loved ones. Modern day refugees look to us for aid and solace. We cannot close the doors or our hearts to them in their attempts to reach safety.

One of the most difficult tasks we will face as a nation, but especially as Christians attempting to live faithfully, is to learn to live without becoming crippled by fear. One of the commentaries says it this way: “We must begin to see that our task is not to destroy the enemy or to become emotionally and spiritually captive to the enemy we carry within us. Our task is to learn to live well despite the enemy. We must see that the enemy does not become our excuse to be less than we can be.”(Aha!12-30-01, Joan Chittister in *Simplify and Celebrate: Embracing the Soul of Christmas.*)

We must learn to live in our global village—to understand and accept that others think and act differently than we do. We must remember that Jesus came to save the whole world, not just our small part of it. We cannot let our fears turn us into the kind of people we don't want to be. The promise of Bethlehem was and is that we are not alone in our struggles and strivings. The Prince of Peace came to lead us to the kind of peace that even the powers and principalities of the world cannot destroy. “Every day we must make a new beginning to build the world of peace and justice in our own lives that Bethlehem promised...” (ibid, Chittister). As the carol reminds us that in Bethlehem “the hopes and fears of all the years” were met in the birth of God's son.

On this third day of Christmas, four days away from making new year's resolutions, let us resolve to live faithfully and well, rejecting the culture of fear our media would have us embrace. Let us be the kind of people that God calls us to be, loving and accepting the world in which we live with an eye to changing what we can and praying for what we cannot. Let us be mindful of all manner of refugees in our world, those fleeing violence and oppression as well as those who don't fit in whatever way in our current social order. Let us rejoice that once again we have made room in the inn of our hearts, to welcome God's son into our lives again.

Thanks be to God. Amen.