

## Pastor's Message – 12/29/19

Isaiah 63:7-9

Matthew 2:13-23

Today we have a Bible reading that actually takes us out of chronological order. The gospel writer Luke tells us that Joseph took Mary and Jesus to Egypt after the magi had come and gone, but most of Christianity will not even observe the coming of the three kings until next Sunday. They aren't even on the horizon yet. Most of the world, in fact, is more focused on New Year's Eve and New Year's Day than a continuation of the story of Jesus' birth.

The stories of the birth of Jesus are so completely merged in the minds of most modern believers that it is rarely noted that the two gospel writers that speak of his birth, Matthew and Luke, tell different stories of the birth of Jesus with different characters and incidents. So synthesized have these gospel accounts become that it is hard to find a Christmas pageant that does not have both shepherds and wise men, stars and angels. While both Matthew and Luke provide their readers with a genealogy of Jesus (Matthew 1:2-17; Luke 3:23-38), and testify to his being born in Bethlehem prior to moving to Nazareth (Matthew 2:1; Luke 2:4), each presents a unique sequence of events.

You know about the shepherds and the angels and the wise men from the East.

You're familiar with Joseph and Mary and the "little Lord Jesus, asleep on the hay."

These characters are known to us all, and our visions of them leave us with a warm and fuzzy feeling.

But maybe you suspect that there is more than sweetness to this story. Scratch the surface of any Christmas card image, and you're going to uncover greed and passion, danger and death.

Actually, Christmas almost didn't happen. Dig beneath the peaceful picture of Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus, and you are going to find surprises. Take a close look at the gospel of Matthew, and you'll be stunned by the danger and death that permeate the original Christmas story. Christmas should never have happened.

You don't, for example, take your pregnant wife — nine months pregnant with God— put her on a donkey, and pack her off on a 120-mile road trip.

Second, if you do, you arrange for lodging, and don't just hope there will be a room in the inn.

Third, the child is born in a manger. Think about it. How do children survive these days? Answer is, back then, a lot of them didn't. Jesus did. It wasn't a sterile environment to have a child. Wasn't your typical birthing center.

And then there are the wise men who hit a roadblock as they attempt to gain access to Jesus. Sure, the star in the sky is a big help as they make their way to Jerusalem, but once they arrive in the capital they run smack into King Herod, who's already working on an exit strategy in case this new "king" isn't found — and killed. To make sure, scores of male children are killed in what today is known as the "Slaughter of the Innocents."

There is certainly no basking in the Christmas glow in Matthew's Gospel text this Sunday. With a dream of warning, Joseph and his new family become refugees, fleeing an oppressive ruler who wants to kill the child. For Matthew, it is a fulfillment of a prophecy; for Joseph and Mary, it is a moment of terror. For the little town of Bethlehem, it is a tragedy of historical proportions. Any time disaster strikes, natural- or human-originated, questions arise. Follow any news media and between the pronouncement of peace on earth on Christmas Eve and this Sunday's worship, something tragic has happened in our world. Maybe something personal and local, maybe something on a larger scale: another shooting, another fire or flood, something; it is almost inevitable. We still need to hear the promises of Christmas Eve. But perhaps with today's Bible reading from Matthew, our thoughts might veer more toward "so now what" or even "so what."

In horrific contrast to the hope and beauty of the Christmas story, how do we hear the words of the Bible reading from Matthew today as good news? How do we understand a world in which the child of Bethlehem flees with Mary and Joseph into the wilderness, leaving behind a blood-drenched village, awash in the death of innocence, and the innocent? The evangelist tells us, "Now after [the magi] had left, an angel of the LORD appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee'" (Mt 2.13).

The point is that the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem did not make everything instantly better and perfect. We know this. All we need to do is look around us to see that everything is not all better. The Incarnation, the choice of God to enter the human condition, is not about making things all better immediately so there is no more war or violence or hatred or evil or sickness; those things are still to come. It is, rather, about presence. We are reminded again and again that God is here, and that over and over evil seeks to kill the holiness which invites us to experience a heaven-on-earth life of

sharing, compassion, and solidarity with the very people Jesus came to stand with and to serve. The Incarnation is the reminder that again and again we are offered a choice. We are offered an opportunity to do it differently this time.

As an out-of-order precursor of the message in Matthew, a message had already been given 500 years or so earlier by God through the prophet Isaiah. In Isaiah, we hear a hint of how to go forward when the world doesn't fit the destination we have in our minds and hearts. And that hint is simply to tell the story. We will tell what has happened to us; we will tell our story, our testimony of how God has acted for us and with us. We will tell the stories we read and the stories we live. We will tell them to one another, and we will tell them to the world. And as we tell them, we will remember what God has done and is doing. Despite living in a world that doesn't look like what God's reign should be, we will see glimpses of it here and there, in us and beyond us. And we will tell that story too.

Storytelling, or testimony, isn't just a way of whistling in the dark to keep the fear at bay. Testimony is reliving the moments of salvation; it is reclaiming the presence that seemed so real – because it was real – in the dark of our Christmas Eve service. Testimony is relighting those candles that we held into the air as we sang “Silent Night,” except now instead of wax and wick, we bring stories and memories to light the darkness in which we live—until the darkness begins to resemble the light.

It is appropriate for our next big event to be New Year's Eve after the story in Mathew today. Isaiah reminds us to look back to look forward. He reminds us to consider and to remember the stories of God's unfailing love and of all the things God has done for us – God's people. It is appropriate for us to remember and to remind ourselves of how God has been present in the past and how God has promised to be with us into the future.

Ask an elder of the Church, ask your grandparents or your parents of the blessings they remember from the past and the good things that have happened in the past and for which they are still grateful. Then reflect on what is similar to and what is different from those times and the present. Look for evidence of God's continuing faithfulness. For Isaiah, looking back reveals God's presence and support in “all the years.” Examine how your church's history reveals evidence of God's presence and support not just in isolated events, but also “all the years.”

The end of the year is an appropriate time to recall the significant events of the year that has passed. Just as the prophet recounts God's gracious

deeds, let us remember the moments of joy and blessing in this Congregation's history. I've only been here 6 months, but in these short six months, I have experienced the welcome of a new Church family and a new town and a wonderful place to live.

I have experienced this Church's Reunion Weekend when it remembered and gave thanks for 175 years of God's blessings. All throughout that weekend and for weeks before, people came together to put together a program that remembered God's great goodness.

I have experienced Brat Fries and Choir rehearsals and church picnics and worship in the Park.

I have seen and been lifted up by faithful church members who have come together to meet for various ways of service: Membership and Worship and Finance and Church Council and Staff-Parish Relations.

I've had the opportunity to visit our shut-ins and pray with them and celebrate Communion with them.

I've had a baptism and Senior Center worship services and choir rehearsals – heard beautiful music at Sunday services.

When the Parsonage basement flooded, the Trustees jumped into action and took care of that.

I've seen the hard work and preparations that go into the Craft Fair and the Pizza Sale.

I've had the privilege of officiating at three funerals and seen the faithfulness and hard work and flexibility of the women of the Church who prepared a lunch for one of those funerals.

I could go on and on, but through it all, these experiences have been evidence of the LORD's unfailing love and of God's people's response to all that God has done.

It may be hard to accept; it may be hard to accept that the gospel has enemies. The Christmas gospel says: "Jesus is the Light of the World!"

Last Tuesday was Christmas Eve. Christmas is the time when "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son," and someone stood up and announced that good news with good tidings of great joy, and Herod heard it and killed all the baby boys in Bethlehem.

That's the other side of Christmas, the side we don't hear on Christmas Eve. But our presence here and the church to which we belong is proof-positive that:

"The light shines in the darkness,  
and the darkness can never extinguish it." (John 1.5)