

“Christmas Presence”

Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

Second Sunday of Christmas, (Jan. 2) 2022

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*Although the scribes could explain where the Messiah should be born, they remained quite unperturbed in Jerusalem. They did not accompany the Wise Men to seek him. Similarly, we may know the whole of Christianity, yet make no movement. The power that moved heaven and earth leaves us completely unmoved.*

- Soren Kierkegaard

*We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,  
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation...*

- T.S. Eliot, *The Journey of the Magi*

Some of you will remember that I went on pilgrimage to the Holy Land a few years ago. One of the things that struck me was how little Bethlehem seems to have changed from everything I’ve read of the Bethlehem of Jesus’s day.

There are still shepherds “watching their flocks” in the fields. Looking out of the window of the bus as we went to Bethlehem there were a couple of scruffy shepherds and their flocks of sheep following them or grazing on the hillsides. It didn’t take one whit of imagination to see the Luke 2 shepherds out there or even the young shepherd boy David.

The other thing that has not changed was the presence of occupying soldiers. Bethlehem is on the edge of the West Bank, just seven or eight miles from Jerusalem, and to get there we had to cross through a barbed wire covered wall and checkpoints with guard towers. Soldiers were everywhere. It was a place of intimidation. Now substitute Roman soldiers for Israeli and the 2000-year interval has not changed a bit. Roman soldiers and Herod's state police harassed and intimidated the common people then as the Israeli soldiers do now.

My trip to Bethlehem helped remove my sentimental eyeglasses. It is a place where violence hovers right around the edges, where there is poverty and despair and simmering anger. It was the same way when Jesus was born. Luke tells us of the heavy Roman hand of Caesar Augustus which not only forced more taxation upon the poor, but also reminded everyone that Caesar was always watching. Matthew's version of the birth of Jesus is even more unsentimental. He gives us Herod. Luke begins his Christmas story with Caesar Augustus and Quirinius, the governor of Syria. Matthew begins, "In the time of King Herod . . ."

Even though Herod marketed himself as Jewish, and spent enormous time, effort, and money to rebuild and expand the Temple, he was a puppet of the Romans, and he ruled with cruelty and vicious insecurity. His state police and network of informants were ever vigilant for any rumors of rebellion or rivals who might try to seize his power. He was obsessed with his own power and very crafty about holding onto it.

By the time of Matthew's story, Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus have

moved into a house in Bethlehem. Wise men, we don't know how many, came from the East. These wise men or magi, related to the word "magic," were what we might call astrologers, and were pagans who did not know the Bible, and came from what is probably modern-day Iraq or Iran. They show up at Herod's palace in Jerusalem asking a lot of questions about the birth of a king. Questions Herod didn't like.

Herod becomes alarmed and all Jerusalem gets scared – and when Herod is scared everybody is scared. After lots of questions, Herod calls the Wise Men in and tells them to find this king, this Messiah, in Bethlehem. "And when you find him, send word to me, and I'll come and pay him homage, as well."

Well, you remember what happens. The Wise Men follow the star until they find Jesus. They kneel in worship and offer gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Then they are warned in a dream to beware of Herod and return home by another route.

When Herod discovers his betrayal, he goes into a rage and orders the murder of every child under two years of age in and around Bethlehem. Mary and Joseph are warned in a dream and escape to Egypt with their baby just in time.

This is Matthew's telling of the story of the birth of Jesus. Not a pretty sight. Certainly, not sentimental. No Hallmark cards. No angels singing. No shepherds. Lots of blood. Cruelty. Great grief. And plenty of politics – where everything is about power. In the middle of it all, here are pagan Wise Men kneeling in worship

and giving extraordinary gifts.

Even though the Magi are given clear instructions by Herod that they are to report back to him, they stop to worship the infant Jesus and give these gifts. These fellows were not called wise for nothing. They knew the consequences for not obeying Herod; they knew the risks. They knew his capacity for violence and evil which results in the slaughter of the innocents.

How are the Wise Men overwhelmed with joy so that even in this story of violence and darkness, they come and adore the baby Jesus? What makes them worship in the midst of darkness? And how is this story “good news?”

This is a hard world, full of evil, pain, and grief. Everything that happens in this old world is not God’s will. It is not God’s wish or God’s will that children die, that people starve, or that there is immense cruelty to one another. And there are plenty of Herod wanna-be’s, and devotees of Herod-types, who are afraid of losing power and losing control, and are ever more ready to use violence to hold onto it.

For some, faith and worship, is to focus on pie-in-the-sky while being in denial about evil in this world. But not this God we worship in Jesus. This is the God, who does not deny the world, does not sugar coat suffering and evil. Instead, this God enters into it! This is the Incarnation, Emmanuel, God with us! God takes on flesh, becomes human in Jesus and lives right in the middle of all this!

Matthew's telling of this story is clear that not only does Emmanuel, God with us, enter into this world and takes on flesh but that he confronts sin and suffering and evil, too. This story of Wise Men worshiping Jesus in the middle of violence and darkness tells us that we cannot separate Christmas from Good Friday. We cannot have the Incarnation without the Crucifixion. No sentimental Christmas here. This Jesus of the gospel was born in the midst of suffering and death in order to announce and embody a kingdom of life and justice and peace even to the point that results in his own suffering and death.

Right here in the beginning of the gospel story, it is clear that God is up to something different. Born as a helpless infant while surrounded by an evil, fear-filled king, the Way of God in Jesus is the Way of Life and Forgiveness and Hope and Joy. These Wise Men have some sense that God is up to something extraordinarily different. They have the gospel sense to kneel in worship even though the darkness hangs heavy just outside the door. In fact, because the darkness hangs heavy just outside the door, these Wise Men are compelled to kneel and worship Jesus.

Stanley Hauerwas tells a story of the Russian Orthodox Church response to Communism. He says that when we look back at the Russian Orthodox Church, it seemed to be a church particularly ill-suited to resist the Powers-that-Be. The Russian Orthodox Church often acted as if its whole reason of existence was to underwrite the Czars and its "mystical worship" meant that there was little social engagement with the world, with matters of economics and politics and power.

Stanley says that there one Russian Orthodox habit, however, that made the church be the church of Jesus Christ. Before the Eucharist, the priest was expected to go to the porch of the church and ring a handbell. The bell was to indicate that the celebration was beginning. The early Communist regime, however, as part of its anti-religious campaign, outlawed the traditional public ringing of the bell. And even though the Orthodox Church usually seemed to keep its head buried in clouds of smoke, finally the world was impinging upon them in a way that caused the Orthodox priests to discover that God was the God of Jesus, that God was in the middle of this world. And indeed, that was where the Church was called to be.

So the Orthodox priests, and there is no one more traditional than Orthodox priests, doggedly continued to stand on the porches of their churches, ringing their little bells. The State reacted by slaughtering and torturing and jailing priests by the thousands. Yet, the Church refused to quit ringing the bells. In this one small act of worship, the Church, these priests, confronted it nation's rulers with a determination that they did not know they had. God, in God's mysterious ways, had made the Orthodox more faithful than they had ever wanted to be. Almost despite themselves, they became the church of Jesus Christ. Just by ringing a little bell (Willimon and Hauerwas, *Where Resident Aliens Live*, p. 40ff).

What practices of worship do we follow which make us be the church of Jesus Christ? What simple acts of worship remind us who we are and whose we are? What acts of worship empower us to resist evil and darkness which seek to consume us and make us part of the darkness rather than the Light of Jesus Christ?

To bring us back to Matthew, like the Wise Men, what do you do here in worshipping Jesus, that allows you to go home another Way? I don't mean you drive home on different streets. I mean that the King Herods of this world want us to live their way of death and darkness and suck us into their rage and fear and violence. We want to be the kind of church which worships Jesus so that we go another Way, Jesus's Way. In his *Journey of the Magi*, T.S. Eliot said, "We returned to our places, these Kingdoms, But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation." Can we worship the Living Christ, so we are no longer at ease with the bigotry and rage around us?

Can you, because of say, praying the Lord's Prayer here every Sunday, go out of the door and serve, give and forgive, practice peace, and outlast their hatred and rage with the love of Jesus Christ? What do you do in worship that roots you deeply in the gospel of the Living God, and empowers you to withstand death and evil? What do you do in worship that keeps you from being overwhelmed by the darkness?

This is the costly Way of Christmas Presence "p-r-e-s-e-n-c-e," not Christmas presents "p-r-e-s-e-n-t-s." It is the Way of Jesus Christ present in the middle of this dark world, the real Jesus, not some sentimental Jesus.

We don't cancel Christmas because the world is too dangerous and dark. Because Jesus is present; we are present, bearing witness to the Light.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,

Mother of us all. Amen.