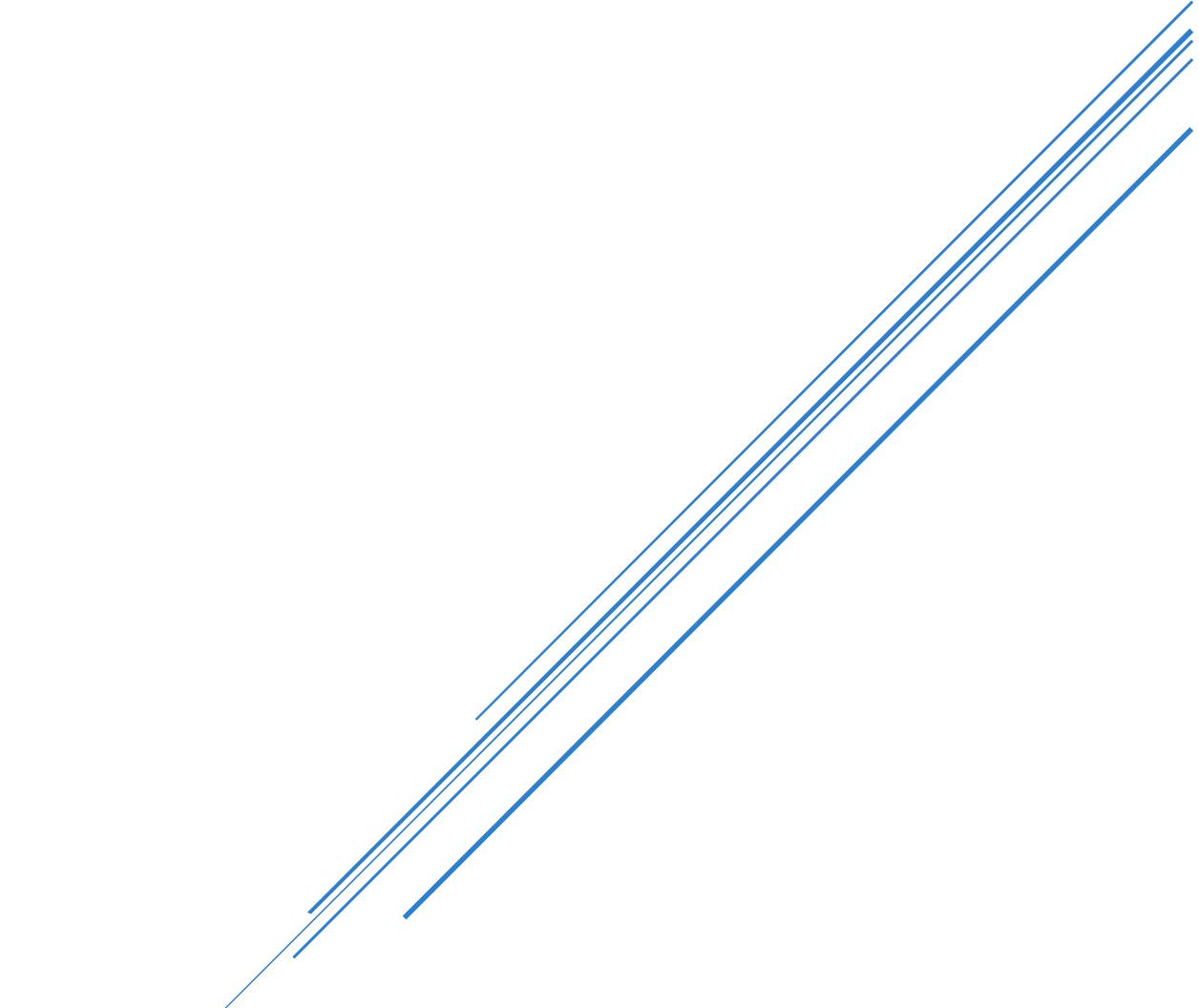


PRESENTS OR PRESENCE?

Isaiah 63: 7-9 and Matthew 2: 13-23



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SERMONIC CLAIM: Despite being disappointed in us and the ugliness of the world, God remains hopeful and committed to God's people through God's merciful, compassionate presence.

“Presents or Presence?”
First Sunday of Christmas
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Isaiah 63: 7-9 & Matthew 2: 13-23

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in Your sight for You are our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Before this past Wednesday, I spent the last several weeks responding to people’s exclamations of “Merry Christmas!” with a kind, yet adamant “Happy Advent!” instead. At school, my friends laughed at my liturgical correctness. In public, people gave me strange looks. At the Christmas tree farm, while my family and I posed for a picture and I loudly declared “Happy Advent!” as the little girl took our photo, Justin, smiling at my side, proclaimed, “No one cares.”

He’s right. Now that Christmas is here, the world is ready to move on. My disappointment in the commercialization of one of Christianity’s most important and celebrated times grows deeper every year. And since the United States is so fond of declaring itself a Christian nation, it takes little observation to see how our modern ethos fails to grasp the genuine meaning of Christmas. As one commentator notes, “throughout Advent and Christmas, popular culture bleeds over into the church’s theology as [little 8 lbs 6 oz] baby Jesus rides with Santa on the way to battle the Grinch.”¹ Advent stops as soon as it starts and the culmination of all this waiting is in the presents under the tree on Christmas morning, rather than the arrival of the newborn baby Jesus.

It’s finally, actually, for real Christmas and these are the lectionary’s suggestions?! The two readings seem to contradict one another. Isaiah says that no angel or messenger saves God’s people, while in Matthew the angel is working overtime to deliver messages that rescue the Holy

¹ Feasting

Family from harm. Isaiah sounds more like a psalm about God's mercies and love, while Matthew narrates the horrors of child killing. Seemingly, the one connection between the two passages is they both mention a savior.

In Isaiah, if we look at the three verses in isolation, they seem nice enough, pleasant even. However, it would be a disservice to the text, to ourselves, and frankly to my professors to ignore the context surrounding these verses which "are airlifted out of a chapter thick with divine wrath and human despair."² The first 6 verses of Isaiah 63 speak of God's vengeful fury and disillusionment with God's people, describing God as a warrior with blood drenched clothing. The praises of God's mercy and love in vv. 7-9 are sandwiched between verses that speak of disappointment from God because God's people rebel against God. The final verses are a direct plea to God, that God would turn back towards the people and seems to blame God for the people's own disobedience. Verse 17 reads: "Why, O Lord, do You let us stray from Your ways and let our hearts harden, so that we do not fear You?" It seems fair to say we have most certainly strayed from the ways of God, and at times our hearts are frozen solid.

Instead of the wrath of God and failure of people, Matthew's text demonstrates the rage of humanity. I waited weeks to say, "Merry Christmas!" and now that Emmanuel 'God with us' has finally arrived, you're telling me he's not even here because he was forced to leave under duress and seek temporary protected status in the land of Egypt because a tyrannical ruler is on an infanticidal rampage throughout the region. Matthew brings no lovely Christmasy tidings of comfort and joy, rather he describes a family terrified, and a community terrorized by one man and his foot soldiers.

² Feasting on the Gospels

Matthew's passage is eerily reminiscent of today's current climate in the United States regarding immigrant families. One of my friends and former classmates, the Reverend Mara Bim, works as a courthouse chaplain, observing immigration hearings, documenting the facts of the courtroom such as the judge's name, ICE agents, and other people present. Her report a few weeks ago in Dallas, Texas includes a 3 year old child representing themselves at court for the immigration proceedings. Mahmoud Khalil, a Palestinian man who was detained by ICE on March 8th of this year, was targeted for his pro-Palestinian beliefs and activism. His wife, Noor, gave birth to their first child while Mahmoud was in ICE's custody. The following is an excerpt from a letter he wrote while in the detention facility in Louisiana:

“...I wake to cold mornings and spend long days bearing witness to the quiet injustices underway against a great many people precluded from the protections of the law. Who has the right to have rights? It is certainly not the humans crowded into the cells here. It isn't the Senegalese man I met who has been deprived of his liberty for a year, his legal situation in limbo and his family an ocean away. It isn't the 21-year-old detainee I met, who stepped foot in this country at age nine, only to be deported without so much as a hearing. *Justice escapes the contours of this nation's immigration facilities.*”

The child in the Dallas courtroom and Mahmoud and his family are just two examples reflecting the world's harshness and cruelty. Articles from reputable news organizations or conversations with community members lead to other stories that echo the words of Mahmoud. To quote Mahmoud again, we need only open up our phones to “bear witness to the quiet injustices underway against a great many people.”

I imagine, just like the Israelites of Isaiah, God is disappointed in us too. We have turned away from God and rebelled against God. Instead of behaving as “God's people, children who will be true to [God],” (Isaiah 63:8) we are doing a much better job of modeling the other parts of Isaiah. We do not care for the widow, the orphan, the stranger, and the prisoner. Instead we choose superficial gifts and lavish presents over being physically, mentally, and emotionally present with one another, because let's keep it real, it's a lot easier to buy a present for the gift exchange than to look a widow in the eye and talk to her about her deceased husband as she goes

through her first Christmas without him. We feel good about opening our wallets and picking an angel from the tree to buy all the presents an anonymous child needs or wants but are far less likely to open our homes to those in need of a warm, dry place to sleep. The message of Christmas has become all about the man in the red suit, intricately lit yards and houses, and the presents under the tree instead of the literal presence of God made flesh in the manger under the shining star. Please hear when I say this: I am not saying you shouldn't buy the angel off the tree or the gift for the exchange. These are good things. I only ask us to consider how we allow God's presence to influence our own behaviors and presence with God and with one another.

When Emily introduced today's choir anthem during practice, I promptly announced my opposition to the song's theology. The lyrics state Mary is post-partum, which every parent knows does not equate to "sleeping softly" as angels sing a lullaby overhead. It means restless sleep, waking up every few hours to nurse and re-swaddle the Christ child and putting a little more hay in his manger because earlier the donkey helped itself to a serving of Jesus' bedding. However, the more we sang the song, the more the lyrics about Joseph resonated with me. "Sing alleluia softly, while his vigil Joseph keeps."

Joseph – the ultimate husband and stepdad – is keeping watch. And I suspect this watchfulness is motivated by the disturbing dream and the news that came with it. He watches Mary sleeping and waits to wake her up because who wants to tell their wife, who is still healing from birth, that they all have to get up, leave immediately, in the middle of the night, and travel a significant distance (it's approximately 30 miles to the nearest border crossing from Bethlehem to Egypt) with a newborn to flee the country because the Galilee National Guard has been deployed to destroy their child. Stories like this that make me wonder how Christians can be so hard hearted towards people migrating, especially when the migration is politically motivated

(such as corrupt governmental systems) or centered around safety (like mass child murder or gang violence), which are the exact motives for why the Holy Family must leave and one of the top reasons people are compelled to migrate today. So, choir, I stand corrected; I bet Joseph was keeping nervous vigil over Mary and Jesus while they slept in the stable as he delayed their inevitable departure.

The early church would have heard Matthew read out loud in its entirety. I studied several translations in English and Spanish and eventually turned to the original Greek. There were two noteworthy discoveries that do not manifest in nearly any of the versions I reviewed. The first is that in both angelic appearances from today's reading, the Matthean author uses the term *iδοὺ*. *Iδοὺ* is an interjection, which we all know from School House Rock "shows excitement and emotion. They're generally set apart from a sentence by an exclamation point, or by a comma when the feeling's not as strong." Ancient Greek grammar does not follow the same rules as English so there is no exclamation point here, but in my head and I imagine in Matthew's head too, the announcement of the angel's arrival demands one.

Besides the exclamation of *iδοὺ*, the Greek word used to describe *how* the angel shows up in Joseph's dreams is also significant. This word *φαίνω* means "to shine, to cause to shine, to appear" and only when the angel of the Lord comes to Joseph is this term used. The first time Matthew uses the word is during the dream about Mary's pregnancy. In addition, the word *φαίνω* is the same word to describe the action of the star in Matthew 2:7. Assuming you are a sighted individual, if you close your eyes and have a bright light shining on your closed eyelids, you still perceive the light, and it is quite disturbing.

A more accurate rendering of verse 13 might be "And then they (that is, the magi) departed. Look! Note! Pay attention! Or (the antiquated, yet classically biblical) Behold! An

angel of the Lord shines down in a dream to Joseph saying, ‘Rise up. Take the child and his mother and flee to Egypt and exist there until I tell you, for Herod is about to seek the child who will destroy him.’” I imagine the angel’s presence in the dream is like an intensified version of when I am in bed and I turn on the lamp to read while Justin is sleeping and he turns over to get away from the light. Except for Joseph, there is no escaping the intrusion of the angel’s shining brightness or the declaration of the angel’s arrival.

In ancient cultures, dreams have 3 modes: message, symbolic, and mantic. “While symbolic dreams deal with the future, most message dreams deal with existential concerns,” and Joseph’s dreams are no exception. They are clearly message dreams. He weds Mary once the angel explains how she became pregnant. He gets up as soon as the angel delivers its message and escapes the country. He returns to Galilee after the angel gives the green light. And the text does not explicitly say an angel is in the last dream sequence (but it’s a fair assumption to imagine that the angel is involved) when Joseph ultimately settles the family in Nazareth instead of returning to Bethlehem. I admire Joseph’s immediate obedience, but I also question his eagerness to comply. He takes Mary as his wife, keeps the kid, moves the family multiple times, all because an angel told him to do it? Joseph’s unwavering, unquestioning submission is odd by today’s standards; however, in ancient cultures “the conclusion of a message dream is always compliance.”³ So, the dreams move the narrative along, but they also demonstrate a key teaching – obedience to God, which is something the Israelites were not always so great at doing.

The Joseph of Matthew is a far cry from the people of God in Isaiah 63. In fact, he is their antithesis in nearly every way. Joseph repeatedly turns back to God through each phase of the story. He does not rebel against these messages that would bring shame on Joseph such as raising

³ Dream book

a child he (and likely the wider community) knows is not his. Joseph was considering quietly leaving Mary. However, after the first dream, Joseph gives no further indication of resistance or abandonment again. Isaiah sings of God's mercies in verses 7, 8, and 9, but actions speak far louder than words and Joseph is a man of action. Thus, the answer to the ancient and current problem of God's disappointment in us, God's beloved people, is action in the form of compliance, even when that compliance makes us feel uncomfortable.

Despite missing the birth of his son, Mahmoud is eventually released and reunited with his family and continues to advocate for human rights. Reverend Mara (and others) return to the courthouse and bear witness to modern day Rachels weeping for their children, day after day, even when they are threatened by people who do not want them there. Churches open their doors to provide sanctuary in the truest sense of the word. A youth group writes letters to their state representatives for months every Sunday afternoon to express their concerns.

These types of resistance require action and presence. And that is the true meaning of Christmas. Like the star shining above the city or the angel in Joseph's dreams, God's presence in the world breaks through and will not be stopped. Despite Herod's best efforts to thwart God's plans, Herod loses and the presence of God's angel, shining into Joseph's dreams ensures success. When people are cruel and unkind to one another, God's presence prompts us to move towards justice and righteousness. To quote Mahmoud Khalil one last time from his letter, "...my duty is not only to liberate myself from the oppressor, but also to liberate my oppressors from their hatred and fear."

Harking back to Isaiah, God's disappointment means God really cares because we "can infer God's character through God's actions." In fact, we never find a Bible passage where something happens, and God is indifferent to the matter. Despite being disappointed in us and the

ugliness of the world, God remains hopeful and committed to God's people through God's merciful, compassionate presence. For us Christians, the culmination of this presence is the gift of the Christ child who teaches us how to be better human beings. So now that Christmas is finally, actually, for real here, we have a choice. We can give in to the fake representation of the season with its beautifully packaged gifts and presents with bows and bells and feel-good theology that rushes through and does not force us to consider the other. Or we can turn back towards the difficult yet rewarding presence of God in Jesus Christ. *Iδον!* Pay attention! Behold! The presence of God shines down among us in God's Son Jesus! May that Divine Presence liberate us from our oppressors and liberate all people from their hatred and fear.

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

Mother of us all. Amen.