



Rev. George Ragsdale
Matthew 2:13-23
December 26, 2010

In Thee Have I Trusted

Today is the Second Day of Christmas. I'm guessing all of you did something creative with your two turtle doves before you came to church this morning. There are 12 days of Christmas. It's the church's way of saying there's more to this mystery of God coming to live among us than can be contemplated and considered and celebrated in one day. So we are here, on this Second Day of Christmas, to continue our contemplation and celebration with this reading from Matthew's Gospel.

It seems a bit out of place, an interruption of the festivities. We're asked to give up the baby in the manger for a bloody massacre. We move past shepherds and wise men to soldiers swinging swords. Mary's lullabies are lost in the long, loud lament of Rachel weeping for her lost children.

I don't know about you, but I'm ready to move on to "three French hens" and "four calling birds." But what if we linger here for a few moments? Sure, it cuts away the quaint, cozy comforts of our Christmas mornings. But perhaps it offers us something deeper: an honest look at who we are and where we live, a glimpse into the very heart of God, and a vision for the real hope in these 12 days, the real hope and meaning of our Christian faith.

The theologian N.T. Wright writes that "For many, Christianity is just a beautiful dream. It's a world in which everyday reality goes a bit blurred. It's nostalgic, cozy, and comforting. But," he writes, "real Christianity isn't like that at all. Take Christmas, for instance: a season of nostalgia, of carols and candles and firelight and happy children. But that misses the point completely. Christmas is not a reminder that the world is really quite a nice old place. It reminds us that the world is a shockingly bad old place."

Matthew seems to get that. He tells us that Jesus is born into a world of absolute terror. Joseph has this dream, this nightmare, and an angel tells him to get up and get out as quickly as they can. Herod knows about Jesus, and he wants him dead. Can you imagine that? The Holy Family throwing whatever they can into a bag, walking quickly (but not too quickly) down the street, out the gate and on the road to Egypt. Imagine Joseph seeing a soldier and his heart just racing. Joseph, Mary and Jesus escape into Egypt, but that doesn't really solve the problem. It's still a shockingly dark world. Herod orders a blood bath in Bethlehem. Death and grief are everywhere.

What's amazing is how fast Matthew's story changes. One minute, the Magi are worshipping at the foot of the manger, the next Mary and Joseph are escaping into the night. Aren't we like that, though? For most of the world it's December 26 and Christmas is over. It's back to business as usual if business as usual ever stopped. You may know that story about how during World War I, soldiers from both sides met in the middle of no man's land and sang "Silent Night" on Christmas Eve and agreed they probably shouldn't kill each other on Christmas, so they played soccer together the next morning. The Germans even sang "God Save the King" to the delight of their British opponents across the way. What's amazing is that when Christmas was over, they went

back to their foxholes and went back to war. I read one soldier's account of it, and he says they almost didn't fight, but someone started shooting into the air over the line as if to say, "We're at war. Let's get back to it."

It's that way in Matthew's Gospel. Jesus is born and there are shepherds and angels and magi, but it's still a world where kings like Herod want him dead. This passage gives us an honest glimpse at who we, as human beings, are, the world in which we live. We're people made in the image of God, we have this capacity within us to worship God, to love God, to love one another. But how quickly we can change. We read this story and Herod becomes this great villain, a bloodthirsty king afraid of losing his power. I was struck, preparing for this sermon, by what the commentator Dale Bruner says of Herod. He writes, "Herod is deep sin in person... [He] teaches us that a reaction of raw human nature to the kingship of Jesus is rebellion. If Jesus is Lord, we are not."

But it's hard, isn't it? It's hard to see in this passage much that makes Jesus look a king. We would be hard-pressed to identify this poor, homeless child, fleeing into the wilderness with his refugee parents as the true Lord of the universe. Jesus is a baby – helpless, defenseless, unable to act. He is dependent on his parents, Mary and Joseph. His very life seems to depend on them, and their willingness to be open to God's Spirit and courageous in following God's instructions, even those as crazy as fleeing, retreating into Egypt.

The infant Jesus, and the faithfulness of Mary and Joseph, give us a glimpse into the very heart of God – a heart of love and grace that will stop at nothing to show us the way of suffering, redemptive love. Jesus, the King of Peace, retreats before Herod, the King of Violence. Later, when Jesus is an adult, ready to begin his ministry, ready to announce God's kingdom, what does he do? Herod's son arrests and kills John the Baptist and Jesus retreats to Galilee. Even still, Jesus clashes with the religious establishment and retreats again, only this time he tells his disciples he must go to Jerusalem.

Now, the disciples must've thought, now he will finally make a stand, show them who he really is. Only, Jesus doesn't. In the Garden, when Jesus is arrested, his disciples bring out swords. Jesus tells them to put the swords away. On the cross, he could've called down God's power and put an end to it all. But he didn't. Instead, he prayed for our forgiveness. As the great preacher Fred Craddock put it, "There is no power like the power of restraint, and there is no restraint like the restraint of love."

Or to quote Fulgentius, one of the early Church Fathers: "Love, indeed, is the source of all good things; it is an impregnable defense, and the way that leads to heaven. He who walks in love can neither go astray nor be afraid: love guides him, protects him and brings him to his journey's end." Throughout his life, from the manger to the cross, it is love – the deep, constant love flowing from the very heart of God, that guides Jesus on his way.

It is also the love that guides those who have dared to follow Jesus on his way. Today is the second day of Christmas. It's also the Feast Day of Saint Stephen. Think about that carol we sing, "Good King Wenceslas looked out, on the Feast of Stephen." He looked out on this day, December 26, the day set aside to remember Stephen, the first follower of Christ to be martyred for his faith.

Standing before his captors, being stoned to death, he prayed the words of Jesus from the cross, “Father, forgive them.”

That’s interesting. The church has always followed Christmas with a remembrance of Stephen, the first follower of Jesus to die for his faith. Tomorrow is the Feast of St. John, who was imprisoned for his faith. The following day is the Feast of the Holy Innocents, the day set aside to remember those children killed by Herod, those children Augustine once called “the Church’s first blossoms, matured by the frost of persecution during the cold winter of unbelief.”

It’s rather dark, ominous to remember such things in the days of Christmas. It’s hard to see how any of this is helpful, hopeful. N.T. Wright once compared Christmas to God lighting a candle. And, he says, “You don’t light a candle in a room that’s already full of sunlight. You light a candle in a room that’s so murky that the candle, when lit, reveals just how bad things really are. The light shines in the darkness, says St. John, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

So it is that this passage from Matthew invites us to consider the real hope of these days, the real hope and meaning of our Christian faith. It’s not a glossed over, slightly blurred view of reality. Matthew knows there is darkness. Herod rages out of control, there is bloodshed, there is weeping. But Matthew sees something else happening. He has a keen sense that God is in control. That love is charting a path in human flesh for us. God goes the way of helpless infant. God goes the way of a refugee family, fleeing for safety from a ruthless tyrant. God goes the way of a humble servant, who lays down his life to show us the way of love. It’s just a tiny flicker of light in an otherwise dark world, but Matthew, Stephen, John, a whole host of faithful companions of Christ, they knew that that light, the light of love, cannot be extinguished. Ultimately, it wins the day.

Oddly enough, the medieval church actually included this scene from Matthew in their nativity pageants. Can you imagine doing it in our versions here, two nights ago? Jesus is born, shepherds and magi come to worship him. Mary, Joseph and Jesus escape into the night. Herod’s armies storm the village. There is weeping. Rachel weeps and refuses to be comforted.

That’s how it went in the medieval church. But then, a song would begin. It would’ve been a familiar song, one sung by Christians since the fourth century. The song is led by Mary and Joseph, processing back through the audience, followed by animals and angels, shepherds, wise men, Rachel and the grieving mothers of Bethlehem. They are joined by soldiers, by the innocent children, and by Herod himself. All of them, even the audience, join in singing:

We praise thee, O God, we acknowledge thee to be the Lord... When thou hadst overcome the sharpness of death: thou didst open the Kingdom of Heaven to all believers... We magnify thee and worship thy Name. O Lord, let thy mercy lighten upon us: as our trust is in thee. O Lord, in thee have I trusted: let me never be confounded.

This Christmas season, let’s be honest: there’s darkness in the world, darkness around us, darkness within us. But God has lit a candle. Jesus *is* the light of the world. Let us put our faith and trust in Him, that in Him we may never be confounded.