

"THE GOD WHO SEES"

Matthew 2:13-23

December 26, 2021

York Center Church of the Brethren

Pastor Christy Waltersdorff

Our Christmas festivities aren't even over yet, and Matthew brings terror into our Nativity story. Last Sunday we heard about the foreign visitors who were seeking the baby who was the king of the Jews. We heard about Herod, the king who feared and hated anyone who wasn't him. Because of this king, the story turns quickly from the adoration and worship of Jesus by the wise men to the fear and violence of a senseless massacre ordered by the king.

Can't we just bask in the glow of our Christmas lights for a few more days? Can't we ignore the nasty parts of this story and just pretend everything is happy and bright? We have been celebrating the birth of this special child and now we must focus on the cost of this incarnation. It is an awful jolt! The peace and joy of Christmas give way almost immediately to fear, impending danger, and horrific violence.

Many of us have wrapped ourselves in the cozy warmth of this season and wish to remain there for a little while longer. But Matthew's Gospel brings us face to face with the reality of this world which the Son of God has entered. It is a world where the forces that oppose God's way are very strong. As much as we want to- we are not allowed to linger at the manger, gazing at the baby. We, like Joseph and Mary, are called to get on our feet, pay attention to God's call, and do what we can to set things right.

Think about what it means that the transcendent God, born in all the vulnerability and fragility of a human baby, is totally dependent on two human beings for safety and a future. Matthew's telling of the Nativity focuses on Joseph. We learn very little about Mary in these opening chapters. We find out that Joseph is a good man, a devout Jew from a long line of devout Jews. He is also a man who is attentive to the call of God which comes to him in his dreams.

In chapter one God's messenger tells him to marry Mary and claim the child as his own- which he does. In chapter two Joseph is visited by an angel in his dreams three times. And three times he responds to the message to protect the child. The first time he is told that Herod wants to kill Jesus so he should take Mary and the child to Egypt. They remained there until Herod died. That night the Holy family crossed not only borders but continents. They fled to North Africa to get away from a cruel, paranoid king.

At that time in history there was a large Jewish community established in Egypt. Hundreds of years earlier, when the Babylonian army overran Jerusalem, many Jews fled

the war and started new lives in Egypt. Chances are that Mary and Joseph found a home among their own people in that foreign country. History doesn't tell us where they settled but it is estimated that they traveled three or four hundred miles to safety!

Once again, we see that Matthew is not writing history but theology, the story of God and God's people. Matthew's church was made up of mostly Jewish Christians, some of whom had been kicked out of their synagogues because of their decision to follow Jesus. They were trying to figure out how to incorporate their Jewish history and tradition with their new Christian faith. Matthew's purpose is to show that Jesus is the fulfillment of their scriptures, what we call the Old Testament. He wanted to prove to them that Jesus was, indeed, the Messiah promised by God, the One their ancestors had prayed for and waited for. Matthew helps them to define their new identity without throwing away their legacy as Jews. He shows quite clearly that Jesus also was a Jew.

Both Matthew and Luke show us that the story of Jesus is a story about power- God's power versus the power of the Empire (which in this case was Rome); the power of life versus the power of death. Not everyone is happy when Jesus is born because he threatens the foundations of human religious and civil power. He came to subvert human values and in doing so, establish the reign of God. From the very beginning, the road Jesus walks is marked by both God's promises and human resistance. Jesus is the living presence of God's promises and a constant irritant to those who claimed and hoarded human power.

Joseph's second dream in chapter two comes with the good news that awful King Herod has died and it is safe to return to their homeland. But when they arrived Joseph realized that Herod's son was now in power and that made him very nervous. Another dream, another angel messenger encouraged Joseph to move his little family further north into the district of Galilee, in the village of Nazareth. And that is where they settled, made their home, and raised their child.

According to Matthew, Jesus starts his life as a refugee- fleeing from Bethlehem to Egypt, then briefly from Egypt back to Judea, and finally from Judea to Galilee.

There is nothing sentimental about Matthew's birth story. It is set in the turbulence and terror of a violent history where tyrants murder children and families flee in the middle of the night with only what they can carry. Can you imagine living in a time like that? Unfortunately, too many people can.

According to the United Nations Refugee Agency, currently 84 million people worldwide have been forcibly displaced from their homes. 48 million are internally displaced people. 4.4 million are asylum seekers. 26.6 million of these are considered refugees, over half of whom are children. Refugees are defined as those persons who are

fleeing conflict or persecution. International law demands that refugees are to be protected and must not be expelled or forcibly returned to dangerous situations.

The Gospel stories of the birth of Jesus show us quite clearly that through this birth God graciously, mysteriously, and defiantly breaks into human lives. This newborn baby is born into a world where he is not welcomed by those in power. He will spend his life crossing borders, welcoming outcasts, and breaking down the walls erected by human fear, greed, hatred, and evil.

So, tell me, how is this story not political? Tell me how Jesus did not threaten the powers that be of his day and ours. Tell me, where does Jesus stand right now- in this time and place? Throughout his life Jesus will incite the fury of many threatened Herods. In the end, they will kill him. But we know that wasn't the end. We know that Herod still stalks the earth. We know that children and those without power are still at risk. And we know that we are still called to follow the way of Jesus, to speak up for those with no voice and protect the most vulnerable, regardless of the cost.

David Lose reminds us that Matthew's account is realistic: *"We live in a world riddled by fear, a world of devastating storms and elementary school massacres, a world where innocents die every day of preventable illness and hunger. Matthew renders an accurate if also difficult picture of the world. And that is what is at the heart of Matthew's darker story of Jesus's birth: the promise that it is precisely **this** world that God came to, **this** people so mastered by fear that we often do the unthinkable to each other and ourselves, **this** gaping need that we have and bear that God remedies. Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us, the living, breathing, and vulnerable promise that God chose to come and live and die for us, as we are, so that in Christ's resurrection we too might experience new life."*

Over two thousand years ago, the birth of Jesus disrupted the world.

Let's make sure we allow him to disrupt ours too.

Amen.