

Sermon – “Not What We Expect”

Sunday, January 1, 2017

Scripture Readings: Hebrews 2:10-18, Matthew 2:13-23

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The Letter to the Hebrews speaks of an odd-sounding claim: that God would come among us, as one of us, and suffer among us, and that Jesus lived and died to reconcile us to God. Hear these words of scripture from Hebrews, chapter 2, verses 10-18.

*<sup>10</sup>It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings. <sup>11</sup>For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call the brothers and sisters, <sup>12</sup>saying, “I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters, in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.” <sup>13</sup>And again, “I will put my trust in him.” And again, “Here am I and the children whom God has given me.”*

*<sup>14</sup>Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, <sup>15</sup>and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. <sup>16</sup>For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham. <sup>17</sup>Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. <sup>18</sup>Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.*

Today’s Gospel reading tells of a disturbing episode following the visit of the wise men to the holy family. The last time this reading came up in the lectionary cycle was near the 1-year anniversary of the Sandy Hook Elementary School massacre. Listen for God’s Word in this passage from Matthew 2, verses 13-23.

*<sup>13</sup>Now after they [the wise men] 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 to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” <sup>14</sup>Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, <sup>15</sup>and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, “Out of Egypt I have called my son.”*

*<sup>16</sup>When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. <sup>17</sup>Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:*

*<sup>18</sup> “A voice was heard in Ramah,  
wailing and loud lamentation,  
Rachel weeping for her children;  
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.”*

*<sup>19</sup>When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, <sup>20</sup>“Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child’s life are dead.” <sup>21</sup>Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. <sup>22</sup>But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. <sup>23</sup>There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, “He will be called a Nazorean.”*

This story is not what we expect right at Christmas. The hymns of celebration are still echoing through the sanctuary, lights and decorations still hang triumphantly, the wrapping paper is barely off the gifts, and here we suddenly find ourselves listening to a story about fear, fleeing in the night, and atrocity.

It is an odd quirk of the lectionary that has us reading this story here, the first Sunday after Christmas Day. The church calendar hasn’t even gotten to the appearance of the wise men yet—their arrival is celebrated on Epiphany, January 6—but here we are reading about what takes place even later, after they depart.

And it isn’t pleasant. It isn’t Christmas-y at all. All the proclamations of joy and anticipation, salvation and blessing, come to a sudden and screeching halt here. Mary and Joseph, despite having heard promises of God’s favor, received the shepherds, and witnessed the adoration of wise men bearing gifts from afar, have their exultant visions of the fulfillment of God’s promise interrupted, by a nighttime warning and an escape just ahead of Herod’s men. The mothers throughout the rest of Bethlehem have it far worse; they don’t even have any idea why the king has brought unexpected death to their homes.

This isn’t what we expect to hear about right here in the middle of the 12 days of Christmas. But the startling appearance of this awful story goes beyond an eccentric choice of the editors of the modern Revised Common Lectionary. There is a centuries-long history within the church of remembering the infants of Bethlehem on or around December 28. And since this story occurs while Jesus was still a baby or a toddler, no matter what order we read it in, there really is no way of escaping a seemingly drastic narrative juxtaposition between the glorious birth story and the story told today.

But if we think merely hearing this story in the middle of Christmas celebrations is unexpected, we should consider how much more the actual events themselves, and the entire shape of the incarnation narrative, were not what anybody expected. The manner of God’s arrival on earth overturns almost every expectation of almost everybody.

Mary expected to be a normal carpenter’s wife, until an angel announced to her a very different plan. Joseph anticipated the normal life, too, before a pregnant fiancée and another angel appearance completely overturned his expectations, too.

Many of their contemporaries’ expectations were for a Messiah taking the form of a political leader, after the manner of King David, militarily delivering their nation in a visible, worldly way, casting off its occupiers, and bringing Israel to a lasting place of peace, justice, and life. Clearly Herod had this expectation, or at least knew that the people did, and so a potential Messiah was a direct threat to him, and the soldiers were sent to end it.

We think we know better, that the Messiah who came was different from the Messiah those people expected. But in reality we hold many of the same mistaken expectations. Consider this question: why does it surprise us that the celebration of Jesus’ birth is disrupted by mass murder? Is it not because somewhere inside us, we expect Jesus’ arrival to have ended such things as this?

That injustices and evils persist, seemingly unchecked, shouldn't surprise us, since we have lived our entire lives in a world where they have continually happened around us and sometimes to us, but even so, every December (or October if we allow retail stores to be our guides), a steadily growing avalanche of carols, bells, feel-good movies, and other cultural phenomena push us right back toward the notion that we can and should expect everything to be okay—no, perfect—when Christmas arrives.

These misguided expectations apply not only to the physical birth of Christ, they also can be found in that moment we might call the birth of Christ into our own lives. Some branches of Christianity give a lot of attention to your conversion story, to some particular moment where you truly met Jesus Christ in your heart. But though Presbyterians don't talk about such things as frequently, that doesn't mean we don't have those moments. Many or most of us who are committed to the church have experienced such a thing, or will, sometime in our lives. Perhaps we were at a place of doubt, of fear, sorrow, or failure. In our time of desperation we encountered God in some way, and we took up a life of faith, either for the first time or with renewed vigor.

To have God reach into your world and touch your heart is powerful. It is a beautiful thing—as the song goes, “How precious did that grace appear / the hour I first believed.” A deep, spiritual experience of the God who stands behind the whole universe can be profoundly transforming. It can change us, for real.

But there is a trap there. Because this kind of experience so intensely re-arranges our perspective, we very easily make a certain mistake of expectation. We feel everything has changed. And there is a real sense in which it has. But we carry in with us our pre-existing notions of how our savior will come to us. Like men and women of Jesus' time, we still seem to expect one who comes thundering in, always clearly visible, at once overthrowing injustice, temptation, sin, and everything else that is wrong; in an instant removing these things from us altogether.

But things go otherwise. A day later, or a week, or a year later, we find the same old temptations visiting us. We discover that, far from being transformed into saintly perfection, we are still cruel to our loved ones and fail to extend to others the grace that has been extended to us. Injustices and losses build up around us, and we find our revitalized faith in danger. For some of us, it comes to a crisis point, a time when we cannot understand how to reconcile the unchanged world around us and in us with the change we had thought we found. For others, the energy of faith erodes away slowly, and one day we find ourselves remembering our exhilarating moments of enthusiastic commitment to God as a far-off dream, as of a Christmas long ago.

We are not helped in this by the inch-deep, pop theology that surrounds us everywhere. The transformation of Christmas, from the discovery of hope—of a light shining in the darkness that the darkness will not overcome—into a sappy, superficial, and unrealistic depiction of a day in which there is no darkness, a day on which pain is gone and all the world is holding hands, leaves us confused when our lives don't look this way. The spirituality sections of our bookstores, filled with claims that God promises us all smiles and worldly abundance, set us up for crises in our faith when we hit upon true loss.

For the world sometimes makes us suffer, or leaves us having little when we choose faithfulness instead of having much. The martyrs and those imprisoned for Christ from ancient times to today are blessed with the gifts of endurance and perseverance, but not with good careers, long lives, and everything working out, magically, on Christmas day. And we heard today of something quite awful: “Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled,

because they are no more.” I dare you to go up to one of the mothers of Bethlehem on the day Herod’s soldiers visited her house with the sword and tell her to smile, to put aside those uncheerful thoughts that drag her down, because, as many a best-selling book would tell her, all God wants is for us to have happy, healthy families and abundant life.

Now don’t get me wrong; the blessings we encounter in this life are gifts from God which we should accept with praise and thanksgiving, and God does promise us not merely abundant, but everlasting life. But even with all the evidence we can plainly see, with a Jesus who flat-out said many of his followers would suffer for his name’s sake, we hear his promise in the way, I suppose, we want to hear it: as the same, mistaken expectation of a worldly Messiah who comes in and instantaneously cures our present lives. But when we fall for the temptation of that kind of expectation, which almost all of us do at least to some degree, we build up a very precarious and fragile structure of faith.

I suspect nearly all of us have had, or will have, to struggle at some point with the difficulty of holding onto faith in the face of something awful. When we come face-to-face with prolonged illness or death, great loss, or serious injustice, we sometimes find it very hard to go on believing.

But why is this so? Did we not know, when we signed up for faith in the first place, that everyone will die, that people will suffer, that in this world goodness is sometimes punished and evil sometimes rewarded? Surely we have all along been aware that bad things happen. And so when they happen, for us to treat this as somehow a surprise, as an eventuality that the Gospel never anticipated, is an odd thing for us to do.

We do it because our expectations are confused and have wandered away from the Gospel that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John actually tell us about. This awful episode from the Bethlehem of long ago comes as a corrective. It comes right at the beginning of the Jesus story, and if we listen, it will help prevent us from getting off on the wrong interpretive foot from the start. We may not want to listen to such a story today, if we are lucky enough to be people whose holidays have been full of celebration and fun, because it seems like a depressing contrast with light and happiness, joy and festivity.

But much of the whole world is a depressing contrast with light and happiness, joy and festivity, and, if we pay close attention, this story, far from undercutting the Good News, is doubling down on the Gospel writer’s claims about the magnitude of the hope to be found in the Christmas event. Matthew hits us with this story right in chapter two of his Gospel. It is the very first thing that happens after all the nativity scenes. If depressing, horrific things persisting after the birth of our Lord undermine the credibility of the salvation of Jesus Christ, then Matthew’s Gospel has to close up shop and go home right here.

But it does not. It not only acknowledges that this kind of deeply troubling, awful, evil thing transpires in the world, but later goes on to predict more of it, and then still goes on to preach the hope of Christ.

If Matthew can recognize the horror of the mother and her child who is no more, and yet still preach of a God whom we can trust to deliver us, then the only way we can understand him coherently at all is to realize he is telling us of a hope even more powerful than death, a salvation far deeper than we understand or expect, one where even a final, inconsolable loss of everything—of life itself—is reversed.

Cheap substitutes abound for the deep Gospel of the real Christmas. They are found in the diluted, commercial Christmas, which promises nothing more meaningful than niceness, and in the messages of celebrity preachers who sell us on the promise of pleasant, suburban lives of worldly contentedness with a heavenly personal assistant. They soothe us with what we kind of

like to hear, they demand little and are easy to subscribe to, and they fit right in with what we would like to expect in life.

But even the shallow things they promise, like worldly success, don't bear out in reality, and they have nothing to say at all about Rachel weeping for her children.

Matthew tells of something altogether different. There is no pretending life is, or can be, all smiles and satisfaction. We see in this story an unmistakable demonstration of just how much we need a savior to come to this world. And if you find this compelling, and follow his account to the end, you will see him also show us why we might consider believing Jesus is this savior, come for real.

Our expectations are mistaken, but our hope is not. We are given a Messiah who does not overthrow the Romans; he overthrows death itself. This is why we celebrate, why we carry on in faith through the good and through the bad. We lift up our voices and proclaim joy to the world; for not an earthly king, nor a cheer-you-up message, but the Lord is come. Amen.