

Jesus Was a Refugee
A Sermon on Matthew 2:13-23
First Sunday After Christmas
January 1, 2017

Introduction

It is the First Sunday After Christmas. Most of us still have our Christmas trees up. We look at Christmas as a time for home and family. We are relaxed and happy as we come to church today.

So, of course, the gospel shakes all that up. Today's scripture is about a king who kills babies. Herod orders the murder of every male child under the age of two in Bethlehem. The baby Jesus is driven out of his home and flees to Egypt. The other baby boys in Bethlehem are not so fortunate. This episode is called the Slaughter of the Innocents.

How does that fit with Christmas? Maybe the gospels have a different idea of what Christmas is about.

First Move: Withdrawing to the Margins

Today's text begins ominously: "after they withdrew." They refers to the magi. The lectionary holds the story of the magi until next week on Epiphany Sunday. The magi have double crossed Herod. They were warned in a dream not to return to Herod because he wanted to kill the baby. They obeyed and returned to their country by another road.

The Greek verb, ἀναχωρέω, appears three times in today's text. It is usually translated as withdraw. It is often used in a military sense, withdraw from battle. The root meaning of the word is to separate from something. The text three times talks about separating from danger.

The wise men are instructed in a dream to withdraw instead of going back to Jerusalem to tell Herod where they found the new-born King of the Jews.

Herod is exceedingly angry when he discovers that he has been tricked and made a fool of. He orders the execution of all boy babies, age two and under, in Bethlehem and all the regions around it. Herod shows that he is hypocritical. He had told the magi that he wanted to worship the baby boy. The theologian Stanley Hauerwas says that Jesus was born into a world in which children were killed to

protect the power of tyrants. It is still happening today. Most of the casualties in war are civilians. Women and children make up a large percentage.

Then an angel appears to Joseph, also in a dream. “Arise and take the child and his mother and flee into Egypt. Be there until I tell you for Herod is about to search for the child to destroy him.” Matthew describes Joseph as a righteous, obedient man in Chapters 1 and 2. He does exactly as the angel says. He gets up, takes the child and his mother in the middle of the night and withdraws to Egypt.

Matthew uses this story to draw parallels between Jesus and Moses. Matthew describes Jesus as the new Moses throughout his gospel. The Slaughter of the Innocents reminds us of the Pharaoh in Egypt, who ordered all Hebrew boy babies to be executed when Moses was born. Moses’ sister hid him in a basket in the river. Matthew’s story of the birth of Jesus begins the same way.

Matthew says that the Slaughter of the Innocents fulfills a prophecy by Jeremiah the prophet. “A voice in Ramah was heard, weeping and mourning much.” Jeremiah was referring to the exile to Babylon, over 500 years earlier. Ramah was a village five miles north of Jerusalem. It was the loading and departure city from which Judeans were exiled to Babylon. Rachel is weeping and mourning for her children who are being sent into exile.

Matthew is acting as a prophet. Walter Brueggemann, an Old Testament scholar, says that prophets don’t scold and reprimand. The prophet brings to public expression grief and tears. The prophet mourns at the suffering that is being inflicted on the people.

If we are going to be prophets, we cannot be just another shrill voice seeking attention. We should have compassion for the people who are suffering. We should grieve at the part we play in causing this suffering and supporting policies that hurt people at the margins.

The problem with the world of the powerful is that when one tyrant dies, he is replaced by another. Or in the words of the rock band the Who, “Meet the new boss. Same as the old boss.” Herod the Great dies and his kingdom is divided among his three sons. The most ruthless of the three sons is Archelaus, who is given control of Judea. Rome will remove Archelaus after only ten years and replace him with a Roman prefect, Pontius Pilate, who served until after Jesus was crucified.

When Herod died, “behold an angel of [the] lord revealed himself through a dream to Joseph in Egypt.” Behold is always a significant word when it appears in the Gospels. It is a religious word. It means to look at something that we should be awed by. Joseph is to behold that an angel appears to him again in a dream. People in the first century would have understood this to mean that God was speaking

through the angel. This is significant. God is speaking directly to Joseph. People who are responsive to God develop their skills of discernment. The farther along they are in their faith journeys, the better they are at discerning God's call. It is if an angel appears to them and tells them God's will.

The angel tells Joseph, "Arise and take the child and his mother and go into [the] land of Israel, for the ones have died who were seeking the life of the child." The holy family is reenacting the exodus from Egypt. Joseph again responds obediently, doing exactly as the angel tells him. He arose, took the child and his mother and went into the land of Israel.

When Joseph got to Israel, he heard that Herod's son Archelaus was ruling Judea. He feared that the son was as ruthless as the father. Again, Joseph was warned in a dream not to return to the family's home in Bethlehem. Instead, Joseph withdrew to the north, into the outer regions of Galilee and settled in Nazareth.

Second Move: Responding to Oppression

Three times we see angels instructing righteous people to withdraw. This surprises us. The theologian Walter Wink calls creative non-violence Jesus' Third Way. Instead of fighting or fleeing, which are the first and second ways that we respond to a threat, Jesus instructed his disciples to try a third way: resisting non-violently.

Jesus himself withdraws several other times in the Gospel of Matthew. He withdraws to Galilee in Matthew 4:12 after he hears that John the Baptist has been arrested. Jesus withdraws again at Matthew 12:15 after he hears that the Pharisees have conspired to destroy him. He withdraws in Matthew 14:13 after he hears that Herod Antipas has killed John the Baptist. He goes to a lonely place to pray before he feeds the 5,000.

So how do we know when to withdraw from a threat and when to stand up to it? To withdraw has a similar meaning as to be holy. To withdraw is to separate from. To be holy is to stand apart from. Matthew describes the ruling elite as ruthless and corrupt. Jesus calls us to withdraw from the world of the powerful and enter into the world of the powerless. At the end of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus will tell the disciples that they will see him whenever they feed the poor, clothe the naked or visit the prisoner.

We especially need to hear that message today. This has been a political year. We want our political candidates to win the elections so that they can seize control of the majority. We want our political party to have power so that they can implement policies that reflect our values.

If we are honest, we will admit that we also a more sinister purpose. We want to share vicariously in the power of the party that wins the election. We want our values implemented, regardless of whether we can get bipartisan consensus. We will happily see our policies forced on the party that loses the election.

Jesus does not concern himself with the ruling elite or with getting political power. He goes instead to the powerless. He comes by it honestly. He was brought up that way. He began his life as a refugee. After being aliens in a strange land, Joseph took his family to the backwaters of Galilee to live with the powerless.

Jesus addresses the powerless in the Sermon on the Mount. He tells them to use creative non-violence to stand up for themselves, to avoid being shamed by an aggressor, to demonstrate that they are worthy of respect as a child of God.

Third Move: Letting Go of Political Control

That is a difficult message to hear for people who want to reclaim America for Christ. They want to take control of the government and force their conservative social values on the rest of society.

It is also a difficult message for Disciples of Christ to hear. Disciples are all for standing with the powerless, but historically we have wanted to engage the society rather than withdraw from it. Disciples throughout their history have wanted to be at the front of the movement to unite all Christians. *The Christian Century*, a leading magazine for mainline Christians for the past 100 years, began as a Disciples magazine in 1880 and was renamed *The Christian Century* in 1900 by its editor, Charles Clayton Morrison, who was also a Disciples minister. He believed that the 20th century would be known as the Christian century because it would witness “greater triumphs in Christianity than any other century had witnessed.” It was at the height of the evangelism movement and the editorial board believed that America would play a significant role in the Christianization and elevation of the world. Disciples have never been sectarian—we longed for divisions to melt away.

I am afraid that the Quakers and the Mennonites were closer to the gospel vision. They took the Sermon on the Mount seriously. They refused to participate in wars, they refused to take oaths, they dressed plainly and they were the earliest opponents of slavery. The Quakers were founders of the Underground Railroad. Disciples as a movement refused to take a position on slavery.

The Mennonites especially are known as a sect. By a sect I mean a group that largely separates itself from society. They believe that the political structure in society is corrupt and do not participate in it. Zach Gleason, the Mennonite minister who preached here twice, is not registered to vote.

The desert fathers were the first Christians to withdraw from society. They withdrew to the deserts of Egypt in the third and fourth century when they saw Christianity becoming acceptable to Romans. They believed that the church was compromising the ways of God with the ways of Caesar.

I am not advocating that we should withdraw into the desert, though moving to Santa Fe and living on the side of a mountain 30 miles outside of town does have some appeal to me.

I am questioning what it means today to withdraw. In Matthew, it means to stand with the powerless instead of the powerful. To support the refugees instead of the military industrial complex that creates refugees and the demagogues who disparage refugees. If you were raising a family and living in Iraq, Afghanistan or Syria in the last 15 years, would you stay and fight or would you arise, take your children and withdraw to a more peaceful place?

Withdraw in Matthew's gospel also means to withdraw from threats by the ruling elite. We can let go of the illusion that Christians can or should control the government. We should be suspicious of government and assume that no matter which party is in control, the government will be more concerned with retaining its own power than in protecting the powerless.

I am not suggesting that we should go as far as the Mennonites and withdraw from the political process. The Mennonites and the Quakers have almost died out. We can and should participate in grass-roots organizations like VOICE that try to make the government more responsive. We should recognize that political power will only respond to political power. Going out to the legislature and asking them to reform criminal justice or poverty or education because it is the right thing to do will not produce results. We have to mobilize members of our congregations and non-profit groups to show the Legislature that there is grass-root support for the reforms.

Be more concerned about obeying the word of God than trying to win elections or submitting to ruling elites. Recognize that a political party is not going to lead us to the kingdom of God.

Tolstoy and Dorothy Day were non-violent Christian anarchists. Christian anarchists believe that the state is violent, deceitful and idolatrous. They are guided by the Sermon on the Mount. They are anarchists because they believe that the state is inherently hierarchical. They strive to help build the kingdom of God, where God is the ultimate source of authority and the leaders are servant leaders. All people are sisters and brothers; each is an essential part of the body of Christ. Their leadership is marked by compassion instead of by domination.

Dorothy Day gave up a successful career as a journalist to found the Catholic Worker movement. The Catholic Workers built a chain of hospitality houses to feed and clothe the poor. She spent the last 45 years of her life working in those hospitality houses.

She also founded the Catholic Worker newspaper. She wanted to give a voice to people that society had pushed to the margins. The cost of the newspaper is still one cent. I made a contribution and asked them to send us ten newspapers each month. They are in the loggia. I hope you will pick it up and look at it.

Conclusion

Joseph is our model in Matthew's Christmas story. He hears the word of God and acts on it. He is contrasted with Herod, who deceives people to enhance his own power. Josephs and Herods are still with us: Dorothy Day and any world political leader.

We sentimentalize Christmas when we reduce it to a story about hearth and home. It is more than that. We overlook that it is also about an alternate kingdom, where the king stands with the powerless instead of oppressing them. When faced with lethal threats from the king with political power, God's people look to the word of God to determine how to respond.

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