

December 29, 2019 The Dark Side Of The Story Matthew 2:9-18

We are right to emphasize the bright side of the Christmas story. In the birth of Jesus we are reminded that the grace of God, HIS continuous love for us, showers the earth and the people in it with blessing. Event after event, in the unfolding of that story in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke remind us that God is active in the world and among HIS people. The angel Gabriel visits Mary, revealing what is going to occur. The angel of God visits Joseph in a dream and as a result, he chooses to take Mary as his wife. As a couple they make the journey to Bethlehem in response to Caesar's requirement of the census. God is with them. And while we are tempted to think the circumstances were not ideal, they find shelter, and Mary delivers her firstborn in the stable. The shepherds attend to see the Saviour of Israel, bidden by the angel of God, and they witness the heavenly choir that praises God with whom nothing is impossible.

It is apparent from Matthew's account that the holy family stayed in Bethlehem for a period of time close to two years. Was that because Joseph found work? It is never spelled out in detail, but they are living in a house. Did they buy it? Are they renting? There is just enough detail to leave us the impression that this family found prosperity and security in the city of David. And of course in the timing and the outpouring of the grace of God, it is, fulfilling prophecy, where the Magi

found them and offered their gifts, as they knelt before the child who is born to be King.

We are right to emphasize that light has come into the world in the baby who is Jesus. We are also right to notice that the Bible does not present us with a history of Jesus ministry in the world that is without pain, without tragedy. This morning we take a moment to look at the dark side of the Christmas story...and there is a dark side. There is trouble in Bethlehem. There is trouble in Jerusalem. On the human level Herod is behind it, but as mature believers, we can quickly comprehend, that as God pours out his grace to save, another inspires malevolence to prevent redemption from unfolding, to destroy the one who is born to redeem. To put it simply this story of redemption happens in the real world. And in the real world there is an ongoing battle for the souls of men and women and their young.

Once again, there is revelation. In a dream the astute and spiritually alert Magi, receive warning not to return to Jerusalem, not to share the information that Herod craves, where this child is, that is born to be King. It may just be my imagination, but I think I see a hint that the Wise Men themselves are in danger. At any rate, these Gentiles are clearly aligned with the grace of God! Another marvelous detail and reality. At the very least they refuse to participate in such a way as to aid Herod in whatever he intends toward the infant

Christ. They depart for their homelands. They go by an alternate route.

And when the Magi have departed, Joseph's sleep is interrupted once again by the visit of a messenger from God. And Joseph is not just a righteous man, he is a man with experience of dreams that bring angels present. The panic is real. The haste is real. And Joseph's commitment to Mary and their child is real. He does not just get them out of Bethlehem, he gets them out of the country...to of all places Egypt. And Matthew, a Jewish disciple is quick to tell his Jewish audience...this detail also fulfills prophecy found in Hosea 11: 1. When the time is right, when the time is ripe, grace will come to the Galilee region and to all of Israel, from the direction of Egypt. And out of tragedy and darkness there will be by God's willing it, grace and salvation.

Unfortunately, people also have wills and people also have power. In this case it is Herod who is the instrument of darkness. He figures it out. The Magi have succeeded in finding the child. The Magi have not returned to him with the news he requested in Jerusalem. So it is that Herod hatches a new scheme to destroy the child that represents a threat to his holding the throne, under the authority of the Romans. With the information he has he does the math. The star had appeared to the Magi approximately 2 years before they arrived in Jerusalem. They came seeking one born to be king...obviously it is a boy. He orders his death squad to go to

Bethlehem where they are to locate and kill all the boy babies who are 2 years old or younger.

And Matthew tells us even this detail has been foretold in the words of prophecy in the Old Testament...the book of Jeremiah 31: 15..."Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted because they are no more." Who killed these babies, and destroyed these little ones? It was Herod. He is a Machiavellian politician before Machiavelli existed. And because he is Herod, he loses no sleep over what has been done in his name and at his bidding. I referred to him as a butcher last Sunday. And I will tell you he was a heartless butcher. This is true life. The darkness is just as real as are the moments touched by the light of God's grace.

Death and pain are inflicted as ordered, but the intended victim slips through Herod's fingers. Matthew's account goes on to tell us that it was in a dream, after Herod was dead and buried that a messenger of God visited Joseph and told him it was safe to return. And Joseph did return, taking his family back to Israel. But Joseph has a head on his shoulders too. When he learns that Archelaus, Herod's son is on the throne, he does not set up shop or home in Bethlehem but in fact returns to the Galilee and to the town of Nazareth. And this too Matthew tells us fulfills prophecy.

One cannot deny that that is what Matthew wrote. To our knowledge there is no such verse. However, there can be no dispute about these facts. A Nazarene is a

person from Nazareth. In a conversation shared in John's Gospel we find Nathaniel asking the question, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" It is an expression of contempt heaped on an unimportant town. Isaiah 53 expresses the fact that the Messiah would be despised and rejected by men. And Psalm 22 says of the Messiah, that he would be a worm and not a man, scorned and rejected by people. The gist of Jesus coming from Nazareth is indeed Biblically that HIS nation will not receive HIM, will not recognize HIM, will reject HIM. And of course that is precisely how Jesus came to Calvary, and the cross.

One of Matthew's contributions in telling us how Jesus was born in Bethlehem and recognized by the Gentile "Wise Men," is that the story of Jesus will always be about the manner in which HE saves His people who belong to Israel and those who do not have roots in Israel. The Gospels are not given to simply share how it came to pass that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, but indeed, how HE saves those whom HE redeems. He sacrifices HIS life to give us new life. And that we might see the possibility of new life is real, HE rises the 3rd day, revealing that the wisdom of the angels is still true.... "nothing is impossible with God!"

The dark side of the Christmas story reminds us that we are involved in life, in a spiritual war for the souls of mankind. Evil is a real force. Death tempts us into the despair that there is no hope. Only faith that recognizes Jesus as the

Redeemer foretold, can catch the light of God's truth. Jesus saves. Jesus bids us shine, like candles dispelling the darkness, and sharing the kingdom of light. By faith we are touched by the grace of God and changed into agents of light and life. Every kindness is a seed from which faith may grow, filling us with joy even as we kneel before the King of Kings. To Jesus name be the glory, the honour and the praise.

Let us pray;

Lord lead us step by step. Grant that we may serve you in the service we share with our kin, friends and neighbours. May the grace and love of Jesus light our path, especially when we think we have lost our way. When we are hard pressed keep us from being crushed, when we are perplexed keep us from despair, when we feel persecuted keep us from feeling abandoned, when we are struck down, keep us from destruction. Grant that we may always celebrate the name of Jesus. Amen (2 Corinthians 4:8-9)