

January 10, 2021    The Beastly Servant    Matthew 2:13-18

Dearly Beloved;

I have a number of things I want to share with you before I begin this morning's Sermon. It is my understanding we came within \$ 700 of meeting our 2020 Budget. I want to thank you for being so regular and stalwart in your support of St. Andrew's ministries under extraordinary conditions where we cannot safely worship face to face. I am aware that numbers of churches in our Presbyterian family struggled to meet a goal of 50% of adopted budgets. Your faith shines through your stewardship. Again thank you, on behalf of myself and the Session and the Board of Managers.

2ndly: It is pretty clear that we will not be able to hold an Annual Meeting in February as has been our custom. I endorse a strategy whereby our Board Chairman, and our Treasurer will seek to put together a budget proposal for the coming year. It will be circulated among the elders and subsequently among the Board members. Glenn is going to assemble an Annual Report, which will contain that proposal and the motions needed to be passed. Copies of the Report and the Budget will either be mailed to you or delivered to you, and you will be asked to mail in your willingness to support the required motions. If you do not mail in or hand deliver a response, it will be assumed you are in favour of the proposal. I will remind you at the time, but I want you to know we are working on these vital matters.

Given the numbers for Ontario, particularly Southern Ontario and our own region, I have requested that

Session consider extending our suspension of in person worship to the end of March, subject to a remarkable turn around in Covid-19 numbers. No one wants to return to the sanctuary more than I. Meeting with others inside buildings is simply less safe than your remaining in your own homes. Please remember, you do not catch Covid-19 from places, but from other people. Shared air, the fact that we breathe, is the mechanism of transmission. Continue to wash hands, mask and socially distance. When we can gather together, I want you to have the option of being there.

Barbara and I are well. We only go out to get necessary supplies and to keep appointments and pick up our prescriptions. We walk daily, out of doors, in places where we are not close to others, and usually we do not see a lot of other people. God bless you and stay safe.

I am always amazed at how messages planned months before hand can be shared at a time when the world seems to be convulsing in the grips of the very thing I am speaking and writing about. We started back in late November to look at the Christmas story from the angle of “who are the servants of God? and how do they behave?” I started with the prophet Isaiah, who centuries before Jesus was born declared, “For to us a child is born...” (Isaiah 9:6). And because the prophet volunteered, I dubbed him the willing servant. Then I turned to Mary whom I called with reverence the obedient servant. She obeyed in spite of the fact she had doubts, questions and fears. We looked next at Joseph, the reluctant servant. Like Thomas who said he would not believe unless he

could touch Christ's wounds, Joseph had to be persuaded. It took a dream-vision to move him. Luke tells us the story in his first chapter, but clearly it is Joseph's testimony. God's messenger, an angel persuaded him to do what he did not want to do. Then there were the terrified servants of God, the shepherds. What terrified them was an experience of being in the presence of angels of God, the presence of the holy, when they knew they were unclean in their sinfulness, and could never get clean because of the nature of their workday lives. They lived to serve God joyfully. People were amazed at their testimony about the good news that Jesus would save HIS people from their sins. And then there were the "foreign servants" of God, Gentiles. It was to these foreign non-Jews God showed the Christmas star. And they followed that star, and they found the baby in a house in Bethlehem and worshipped him.

Today we turn to the beastly servant of God. Millions of people have asked the question, "If God loves us, why does HE permit evil to exist?" As we have seen this past week in living colour, the greatest democracy in the world was almost brought to its knees and still faces several challenges from a president who fomented violence for the single reason, he wants to continue to be in power, except he lost the election. There are only 2 possibilities. He either has not read the constitution or he does not believe it. Four years ago, he swore to uphold it. And the man does not learn. Having failed in his attempt at insurrection, he has lost his twitter account twice for trying to talk to people about armed intervention on the

17<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> of this month. Why does God permit evil? HE has created us as free and living souls, able to choose, and the only way HE could change that would be to change us into Pinocchio-like puppets, mindless robots. The Almighty God asks us to choose whom we will serve: God or ourselves and our own ambitions.

To some this may seem like a rant. My point is the old, old, problem of sin is still the most terrible problem faced by the world and its peoples, including me. Will I do what I want to do, or will I do what serves a higher purpose? The beastly servant of God in the history of the birth of Jesus is King Herod, a Jewish monarch, placed on the throne of Judea by the Romans in hopes of pacifying the conquered province. The Romans chose Herod because he was smart, and because he would do anything to remain in favour with his Roman master.

So Herod welcomed the Magi to Jerusalem and his court. He assembled a commission of Priests and Theologians and asked of them where the Messiah was to be born. What that tells us is that he may have been Jewish, but he did not study or attend to the Old Testament Scriptures himself. So he set the experts to produce a report, and they report that Bethlehem is the city where this “king” would be born. And by the way, Herod is interested in this “star” they talk about, “when did it first appear?” Because according to the Magi, that marked the beginning of their journey, to worship the one who was born. Herod sends them on their way. “Go and find the child.” And “come back and tell me so that I too

can go and worship him.” When they fail to show back in Jerusalem Herod knows exactly what he must do to keep the crown, and keep Rome happy.

He sends a death squad to Bethlehem. Baby boys 2 years old and younger are to be slaughtered. Thus he fulfills the prophecy of Jeremiah, “Rachel weeping for her children because they are no more.” Jesus was born into a world where evil was, and is real, recognizable, and relentless in its pursuit of the destruction of lives, including the life of Jesus, lest he succeed in saving people from their sins. This part of the Christmas story reminds in case we forget, that the tempter continues to drag us into situations and conditions where we can easily become the agents of our own destruction. Why is it necessary to remind us? Because we carelessly forget, or dismiss, that evil is real. The tempter is as ever present as is the HOLY SPIRIT of God. And in life we are continually called to choose whom we will serve today, in today’s circumstances. The battle for life and to live in the light goes on as we live and breathe.

And why are we surprised by eruptions of evil? Simply because it is easier to not worry about such things, to condemn attention to such matters as superstition, or mindless faith. Blind belief. The Bible consistently tells us that the evil one lurks like a lion looking to destroy and consume. Which is why we are called to believe, with our eyes wide open, to see, and serve, and love and if need be, risk our lives and reputations, to save others, if we can.

Why do I call Herod, the beastly servant of God? For this singular reason: what Herod did in Bethlehem exposes evil to the light. The attitude of believers toward children has changed radically, and in so many cases has saved children from destruction. I have mentioned before that there was an age in which the Church, would only allow church buildings to be built if orphanages were built as part of the project...to save unwanted children, or deserted children, or children who had lost their parents to the dangers of the world.

What Matthew goes on to tell us are the details by which Jesus life is saved from destruction. An angel in a dream. Joseph has learned how to live with dreams that include angels. There is no reluctance about his gathering of the family and taking them to Egypt. When the sword falls in Bethlehem the holy family has moved. This piece of the puzzle reminds us that God's will is sovereign. HIS Son will save HIS people. That does not mean lives are not crushed by the evil that people do...as we saw this week in Washington. We are witnessing the destruction of the great Deceiver. His evil ambitions do not lead to victory.

Let us pray;

Lord we pray for our neighbours in the United States of America, and for their elected President and Vice President. We pray for our leaders and our nation, for we are not less fragile in our pursuit of democratic government. We pray for the church as we know it, for its safe emergence from 2020. We

ask you to lead us and guide us, shape us and mold us, that we might continue to do faithful work in 2021 no matter what occurs. Lord we also cry out, asking for forgiveness of our sins. Shelter YOUR people under the wings of YOUR Spirit. Grant we ask, that Canada may emerge from this trial, able to serve others, beyond our borders. In Jesus name we pray. Amen