

**The Reverend Heather T. Schoenewolf**  
**East Liberty Presbyterian Church**  
**December 24, 2010**  
**Children of God**  
**Matthew 2:13-23**

Our Gospel text for today brings us back to reality, perhaps a bit too quickly, after the celebration of Jesus' birth. The shepherds have gone back to their fields; the Magi have returned home by another route; and the only angels on the scene arrive under the veil of dreams, delivering travel itineraries to Joseph in the dark of night.

I have to say: I was personally hoping to stick around the manger a little longer, soak in the joy of that moment. I've been hoping to pay my own visit to the Christ-child after the bustle of the season settles down. But like a family who takes down their Christmas tree the day after Christmas, we're packing up the manger and following after the Holy Family: running to Egypt at high speed in the middle of the night.

Don't get me wrong: Matthew is a master storyteller. I am impressed with his ability to pack a passage full of meaning and see vividly how these verses are no exception. Matthew, the Jewish Gospel writer with a primarily Jewish audience hits the ground running with a description of Jesus as the fulfillment of Scripture, the long-awaited Messiah. Even in the few short verses of our passage today, he forms an inextricable link between the Christ-child and God's people, Israel. Through the repeated reference to the prophets of old, first Hosea, then Jeremiah – then, actually, one we don't know – Matthew links Jesus to moments of Israel's oppression and God's liberation of God's people: from captivity in Egypt through exile in Babylon. Matthew begins to paint his portrait of Jesus as new Moses – a child spared from genocide, saved to set God's people free. Jesus has come to fulfill Scripture – the fullness of God is at hand!

But even in the tidiness of Matthew's story-telling, the story itself gets pretty messy. As soon as we shift our gaze from the Bethlehem manger, we are thrust into the middle of Bethlehem politics: a king, who fears for the sake of his throne, issues a genocide against the most innocent in the land in an attempt to hold onto his seemingly fleeting power. In a fast escape, the Christ child and his family flee from Bethlehem, and live as refugees in the land of Egypt until the king himself dies.

We rejoice that the Holy Family made it safely to Egypt. We marvel at Joseph's obedience, once again, to an angelic sign. Yet we too grieve over those whose lives were lost at the hand of a tyrant. We gasp in horror at the injustice in our passage and marvel, too, that such horror is going on even as Christ, the light of the world, has come.

Matthew catapults us into the messiness of the Incarnation – the messiness of the human condition, fraught with vulnerability and pain, devotion and triumph. We're reminded from the get-go that the story of salvation is not an easy one. Christ's reign is not fulfilled at the time of his birth; his power to heal and redeem is not exercised in his infancy. Jesus must grow and learn. He must be raised and protected. The Christ-child is just that – a child born of flesh and blood, with all of the risks associated with such a life, even as we know that he is God-made-flesh. The one who has come to save must first be saved himself so that he might live long enough to fulfill his call. His birth isn't enough – not yet.

The verses in the center of this passage remind us of this fact. God has come into the world in Jesus, but redemption hasn't yet been fulfilled. Even with Christ in the world, atrocities like genocide happen, even to the innocent. And just as we are aware of the great power of God that has broken into the world in the infant Jesus – and just as we can see that God's salvific [*Ed: means 'having the intent or power to save or redeem'*] plan is at work, this passage reminds us that God's power is sometimes limited by human freedom. Human beings still choose to hurt each other despite the Divine mandate to love and the divine initiative toward redemption

wholeness, new life, and peace. God certainly does not will such tragedies – not even to spare his Son – yet sometimes these tragedies do happen because people choose to hurt one another. Joy Carroll Wallis writes:

*(Herod) reminds us that Jesus didn't enter a world of sparkly Christmas cards or a world of warm spiritual sentiment. Jesus enters a world of real pain, of serious dysfunction, a world of brokenness and political oppression.*<sup>1</sup>

She likewise reminds us of this: “Jesus was born an outcast, a homeless person, a refugee, and finally he becomes a victim to the powers that be.”<sup>2</sup> Perhaps her words seem like a statement of the obvious, but her words pack a meaning when we imagine this story in our present day, when we call to mind those who live just on the edge of the borders of our nations or our communities: refugees fleeing to save their lives; marginalized persons not yet fully accepted into the embrace of a loving community; strangers in a strange land trying to get along – trying by the grace of God to live lives of wholeness, of safety and of peace. We can name groups of people whose needs have been marched past the House and Senate in earlier weeks of this month. We can remember names of groups of people in our nation and overseas displaced by natural disaster, by disease pandemic or by war. We know these families are out there – we know they too are in need of a safe place to lay their head at night; of a community at peace who will accept them; of those who will care for their needs as if they are their own.

Part of the good news of this season is God’s tremendous solidarity with humankind as demonstrated to us through the power of the incarnation. God met us where we were, taking on our vulnerability, feeling our pain, our need, our fear. God became one of us so that we might be freed for wholeness, for reconciliation with God and with one another, so that we might receive life abundantly. Embedded in this story is a reminder of this good news – so often held before us in the Passion narrative, but so clearly laid before us in Christ’s birth. Indeed, God is with us in this Christ-Child.

Yet we are aware too, just as Matthew was, of a tension in our lives. For we see so clearly that the although God is with us, there is still a ways to go until the fullness of God touches every aspect of our lives – until God’s righteousness and peace and love are made fully visible in this hurting world. We live in this “already-but-not-yet” place in time, where the reign of God in Christ has broken into the world – and continues to break into our world today – yet we are aware of the stark reminders that the fulfillment of this reign has not yet come. Yes, there are manifestations of God’s justice, God’s peace, God’s promise in our midst – but there is still a ways to go.

With the Gospel writer we are invited to remember and name that with diminishes life, to lament the areas of suffering in this world. We remember those who are hurting or ignored, those who are seen as insignificant and unimportant – and then we are to partner with the Christ child to work toward that which brings wholeness, healing and peace. We are invited to follow the example of God-with-us, and stand in solidarity with the vulnerable in our midst, to take seriously the needs of those who are oppressed or disenfranchised, to care for those who are hurting this day.

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<sup>1</sup> Wallis, J. C. (2004). Putting Herod back into Christmas. [Web]. Retrieved from <http://www.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=sojomail.display&issue=041222#4>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

Even with this awareness, with our lens shifting to encompass the picture of the struggles in this world, we are still to keep one foot at the manger, for the promise of this season is always the hope that encourages us, the light that guides us, the example before us. And so also remember: the words of John's Gospel – that the light of the world has come into the darkness; and the darkness cannot overcome the light. And remember: the song of Mary in Luke's Gospel – that Jesus will turn the tables of society so that those who are hungry will be fed, those who are oppressed will be freed. And remember the angel's song, giving Glory to God in the highest and God's promise of peace to all people on earth. This good news is ours, still. This good news is our source of hope – and perhaps it is our call to action. The Rev. William Paul wrote in an article for the PG last week that:

*To celebrate this Christmas is to commit ourselves to the ancient prophet's vision: to break the bonds of injustice, to free the oppressed, to share our bread with the hungry, to protect those who are mistreated, to insure that every person, born and unborn, is wanted, welcomed and accorded respect. This vision is a gift intended not just for Christians, but for all – for black, brown, red and white; for rich and poor – and in all places – east, west, north and south. [...] There is reason for hope even in a world like ours.*<sup>3</sup>

Friends, there is indeed reason for hope – especially for a world like ours. Thanks be to God.

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<sup>3</sup> Paul, W. M. (2010, December 19). Three Christmases: the first two are easy; the third, hard. *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. Retrieved from <http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/10353/1111587-109.stm>.