

2 Christmas; Year B
Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23

Our lectionary gives us choices for a Gospel Reading this morning.

One choice, and the one that will probably be used in most churches today, is the story in Luke that tells of the adolescent Jesus wandering away from his parents during Passover and ending up in the temple having a theological discussion with the teachers.

Now, I suppose if you have been celebrating Christmas since early November it might seem as if that much time has passed since the birth, but by our reckoning today is the Eleventh Day of Christmas, and I'm not ready yet to deal with Jesus as a twelve year-old.

So I have chosen the option from Matthew's gospel.

This is the story that tells of the three mysterious visitors from the east, and of sly King Herod, and of the escape of the Holy Family into Egypt.

I have chosen this story because I believe there are two important lessons to be learned here.

The first comes to us in the person of King Herod.

This may seem like an unlikely place to focus, especially over against the magi or the virgin, Mary, Joseph and Jesus, but Herod has something to teach us.

He has something to teach us about some of the people we have to deal with in everyday life, and he has something to teach us about ourselves.

King Herod had heard that a child had been born who was being called the Messiah, or Savior, and he knew what that meant for the Jewish nation.

He knew about the prophetic anticipation, he knew about the hope for a spiritual revival;

but in spite of all of the hope and promise and expectations that were generated by this birth, it struck fear into the heart of Herod.

This tiny, helpless baby terrified mighty King Herod, so when he heard of the birth he ordered that the baby be found and killed.

In fact, he ordered the killing of all the male babies in the region, just to make sure.

3.

(That's a difficult order to ponder on a morning when

we will baptize three month-old Bryce, but that's what Herod ordered.)

Herod couldn't stand to take a chance.

He couldn't tolerate the thought of anyone threatening his own position of power, not even a newborn baby.

So, knowing all that this birth meant for the Jewish nation, he ordered that the baby be found and killed.

This story make evoke feelings of indignation or revulsion in us, but if the truth is told there is a King Herod who resides in every one of us.

We may not order the killing of the Christ child, but what happens to godly values and ideals when they come face-to-face with concerns for our own feelings of comfort and security and superiority?

When safeguarding our own position, whether in a personal relationship or in business dealings or in national politics or economics or in the church, when safeguarding our own position becomes the most important thing, even more important than the truth, then godly values and ideals can be in grave danger.

3.

There is a danger that those ideals will be compromised or set aside or even blatantly abused.

When we hear the Christmas story we need to pay attention to the part about Herod, too, and we need to remember what misguided, unchecked self-interest can do to the newborn baby.

The second thing I would like us to focus on in this passage is what happened when the angel appeared to Joseph in a dream.

Joseph was a person who was familiar with God speaking to him through the unconscious in dreams.

You'll remember that it was in a dream that God told Joseph not to be afraid to take the virgin, Mary to be his wife.

Joseph was a person of great spiritual sensitivity, but I wonder if he was aware of the amazing irony in what the angel said to him in today's story.

The angel 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."

Flee to Egypt.

4.

I wonder if Joseph thought about what it meant to be sent back into Egypt, back to the place of Israel's bitter oppression and slavery under Pharaoh.

I wonder if he thought about how ironic it was that the place of cruel oppression and bondage should now become a place of sanctuary.

But even if Joseph wasn't aware of the irony, we can certainly be aware of it, and we can also access a whole other layer of meaning of what was happening with the flight into Egypt and the later return.

The angel ordered the Holy Family to go to a place that had been a place of imprisonment and suffering for God's people, and the place of a former imprisonment became a safe haven, a place of sanctuary.

But the Holy Family didn't stay in that place of sanctuary. Jesus came out.

He came out of the safe place, and he would spend the rest of his life in places that were filled with danger, and where his life would always be at risk.

5.

Even though Herod would eventually die, those of us who know the story know that Jesus would never be safe in Galilee or Judea.

But he came back from Egypt anyway.

He had to come back.

If he hadn't come back, the place of sanctuary would have become a place of bondage again.

God took on flesh and became a human being for a purpose, and that purpose could never be fulfilled in the safe place.

In our own time, we need to remember that the safe places can become places of life-sucking slavery, and we need to listen for the angel saying the same thing Joseph heard:

“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.”

Leave the safe place and go to the place where the life you have been given can be lived fully, to the place where God's purpose for your life can be fulfilled.

The message of the angel is a message for each one of us. Where are the Egypts to which we flee when the going gets scary?

6.

We all have them, and they are important places.

Sometimes we need to escape to Egypt for our safety or sanity.

The danger is that we will want to set up permanent residence there, and if we do that there is a chance that the real meaning of Christmas, Christ among us, might pass us right by.

So the challenge for all of us is to distinguish between the legitimate, important and necessary ways in which we seek respite and safe haven from all of the others that are actually places of slavery that keep us from experiencing the abundant life of God's kingdom.

That's another way of saying that Christmas isn't just a beautiful story about a little baby.

It is a time for remembering that you and I have been born because God wanted us to be born, a time for identifying and doing away with any herodian self-interest that could injure or even kill the child, a time for coming out of the safe place in Egypt and a time for finding the place where we can live fully into God's perfect purpose for us.

7.

Christmas may be a time for sentimentality and time-honored traditions, but it's not just a warm, fuzzy kind of time.

It is also a time for committing ourselves to the hard work of ridding the world forever of Herod's diseased spirit of fear. We are called to this work and we are empowered for this work by the tiny baby who was also God.

So, may Mary's son who came so long ago to love us, set our hearts on fire that we may fully know the life that is uniquely ours, that we might help others to experience abundant life, and that we may honor the life that was given for us.

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St. James' by-the-Sea Episcopal Church
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