

1st Sunday after Christmas

Sermon 1.1.17

Scripture: Isaiah 69:7-9
Matthew 2:13-23

This is a strange way to start a New Year. One of the grimmest stories in all of the gospel narratives, the so-called slaughter of the innocents is a strange way to start a new year.

*Herod the king, in his raging, / Chargèd he bath this day
His men of might in his own sight / All young children to slay.*

The Coventry Carol: when I sang this with the University Choir while in divinity school, our director had us practice the change of tone several times. Otherwise a lullaby, this should suddenly turn dreadful.

Meanwhile, back in my classes at divinity school there was the familiar debate as regards scripture when considered from a hermeneutic of suspicion: did this really happen?

This question is asked a lot in reference to the nativity narratives. They were added later, after all, and the supposed witnesses of all that unfolded as regards Jesus of Nazareth—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—were none of them at Jesus' birth. Of course, this itself is a piece of artistic fiction—that our gospel writers were actual witnesses of the events, recording it all as it happened as if they were each an imbedded reporter. The fact is that each gospel narrative is a reconstruction of what happened from some time out. Mark was likely written 30-40 years after Jesus' life; Matthew and Luke likely 50-60 years after; and John was written 70-80 years after.

What's more, the first matter of concern was the crucifixion and resurrection. Our earliest writer of what would become the books of the New Testament was Paul, and he had almost nothing to say about Jesus' life, his concern was almost exclusively about the crucifixion and resurrection. How to understand this shocking turn of historical events; how to make sense of it in relation to the Law and the Jewish way, of which Paul was intimately aware, himself a zealously observant Pharisaical Jew; how to set it in a framework that is both immediate and personal but also grand and geo-historical: Paul was hardly concerned that Jesus may or may not have argued with Sadducees, may or may not have calmed stormy seas with just a word and may have done so from on a boat or while walking across the water itself; that he may have preached a sermon from a mount, or may have preached one while on a plain. (Well, which was it??) Paul would confine himself to the overwhelming task of trying

to understand and communicate the meaning of an event that had no precedent, no material or physical justification, no proof of having happened at all but a random coterie of otherwise strangers (Paul himself being one) who insisted from different regions of Judea (and therefore had no opportunity to conspire), “No, I saw what I saw: Jesus, alive and on the move and even eating breakfast on the beach or on the road to Emmaus or on the road to Damascus or wherever...”

Mark, writing a couple decades later, took the story back a few years. This narrative, which has been called a passion narrative with a long prelude, begins with Jesus baptism, a time when he was well into adulthood. Jesus, according to Mark, began his Christhood when he was around the age of 30.

Only Matthew and Luke begin with the birth. And, boy, do they. They make the most of this barest historical fact—that Jesus of Nazareth was in fact born—creating whole scenes that involve animals and shepherds, foreigners with strange gifts, portentous stars and angelic signs, imperial decrees and government censuses. And every year, clergy get together and wonder prior to Christmas: “Should we tell them? Should we tell our parishioners that it probably didn’t happen this way?”

This year the question concerned the inn that had no vacant rooms. A colleague spoke of this common sense thing, that a town the size of Bethlehem wouldn’t have had an inn. People might have had guestrooms to let out, or guest quarters of however meager a sort. And, yes, maybe all of those were already claimed. Maybe every spare corner of every kitchen and every root cellar was already occupied with people on the move—and thus Mary and Joseph were relegated to a stable. But even a thing such as this might have been let out as a guest quarter of however meager a sort. Whatever: it’s most likely that there was no inn, so it wasn’t full, so Mary and Joseph wouldn’t have been relegated to a stable for *that* reason.

Should we tell them, we wondered. Should we tell them?

No, came the answer; not on Christmas.

That was my answer, anyway—though not because you can’t handle the truth. I don’t actually imagine that your faith depends upon the exact wording of the song the angels were said to have sung to shepherds who were (allegedly) keeping watching in fields over their flocks by night. I don’t imagine that your faith in a universal God whose way and word is love depends upon whether the annunciation of Jesus’ birth came to Joseph (as Matthew tells it)

or to Mary (as Luke tells it). The real and persistent and felt fact of God who is creator and sustainer and redeemer of all is so much larger and all-embracing than the question of whether Mary made a trip to Bethlehem around the time she was to give birth. When really pressed on the question of on what your faith and hope are founded, I imagine it isn't on the details, lovely though they are, of barns and hay or even wandering stars.

No, I don't bother with question of historical accuracy on Christmas not because I think you can't handle having those lovely details wobbled as when the children move the crèche pieces from here to there, but because Christmas is about matters other than the historical-critical method of engaging scripture.

Christmas is about the radical claim of God on his created world, and the urgent desire of God to become a part of it. It's about the favor of God resting on the rough hewn of the world—shepherds and lowly nobodies from nowhere towns like Nazareth. It's about a figure come into the world though free of the sin of the world—this being one implication of the so-called virgin birth.

An aside: having nothing to do with the supposed sinfulness of having sex and everything to do with the stubborn fact of sin that is at the foundation of all of our lives, the storied fact that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary implies that Jesus isn't so ensnared by the structural sin that is at the root of civilization itself, or the familial sins of the sort of we are each inheritors and that limit what possibilities are open to us before any of us take our first steps. The virgin birth challenges us to imagine an historic human being yet one unbound by the complications and compromises that bind us, each and all. Impossible, you say? Yes, except with God.

Given this grandeur and wonder of all the Incarnation of God in Christ at Christmas implies, what does it matter if the inn was full or was indeed non-existent? What does it matter if the Magi were three in number, or thirty, or three hundred, or zero? What does it matter if these sweet embellishments were based in fact, or possibility, or poetic implication and theological claim?

Really, what does it matter if this slaughter of the innocents happened as recorded in the Gospel of Matthew, or didn't? Because, remember, meanwhile, this was the debate back at the divinity school—whether Herod did indeed charge that day to have all the young children of Bethlehem slain?

If at all, he did this because, tetrarch that he was and only wanna-be king, he worried that this apparent new “king of Jews” (for isn’t this what the Magi had called him?) would rival him for a throne that he only barely occupied himself. A tetrarch, after all, is really just a regional governor who rules at the pleasure of the emperor. So Herod’s was a seat of power that was deeply provisional, not absolute. Therefore he’d need to defend it for himself, to protect it. Lacking a “divine right” to it, he’d rely on military might and on skirmishes too small for Caesar even to notice.

Because, I mean, who would care if all the young boys of Bethlehem were slaughtered? They probably only numbered in the low double digits. Fifteen. Twenty. No big deal. The world, if noticing at all, might just shrug and turn away. Really, why spend too much time thinking about what you can’t help, what you can’t stop? It’s Christmas, after all! It’s time for jingle bells and “Ho! Ho! Ho!” This is no time to think about the killing of children.

It’s funny to me now: the argument made against the real historicity of the scriptural claim that Herod sent and killed all the children two years and under in and around Bethlehem was that it was so unrealistic. One argument was that this seemed like high drama, the sort of thing a story-teller might make up to generate animus toward the bad guy who seemed now cartoonishly bad. No ruler would *really* do something so over-the-top as slaughter all the children of a town. No would-be king would *really* commit genocide.

This was one argument—that the story took it too far.

This was an argument mounted by smart people, people who are supposed to know stuff.

I wish we lived in a world where this one embellishment seemed just too unrealistic, just too unbelievable. But I listen to the news and can’t escape the persistent reality of this particular embellishment.

So, as for embellishments, I think it’s time for still more.

How do you think this three-year flight into Egypt was possible? Because that’s likely the amount of time we’re talking about here. Herod the Great died in the year four. If Jesus can be thought to have been born in the year one, which was the Gregorian calendar’s aim but which might have been miscalculated, then the length of time between when Jesus was born

and when he could safely return to Judea was three years, maybe a little under. So let's call it three years that this family was on the run.

How do you think that's possible?

The story tells us the miraculous parts—that an angel told Joseph in a dream, “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 it.” Likewise it was an angel who came to the Magi in a dream to warn them not to return to Herod as they'd said they'd do, to tell him where the infant king was so he, as he said, could also go to pay him homage. Yes, the story tell us the miraculous parts—that all this would happen in accordance with scripture and the long tradition of God amidst humanity in order to keep the Christ child safe. What it doesn't tell us is the more mundane parts.

It doesn't tell us the parts where plain old people might have helped out, *must* have helped out—and perhaps because these parts were assumed by the earliest hearers. Perhaps those who remembered the story of the exile into Egypt, those who wrote these stories down and preserved them, or those who first heard them, would have known very well what it takes to be on the move, what it takes to be a refugee. Perhaps they'd have filled in those blanks between angels and safe passage because *of course* if Joseph and Mary and their infant son were on the run, were refugees in a strange land for three years, someone had to have helped them along the way.

Someone had to have given them shelter for a night, or a few nights, as they made their way from Galilee to Egypt. Someone had to have given them food and water, milk and meat, as they made that journey of over four hundred miles, three times the distance between here and New York City. Someone had to have helped them, political refugees that they were.

Someone had to have helped them settle in once they'd arrived at the random place that they decided was safe—to find secure housing, to scout out the marketplaces where they could trade goods for food, or work for food. Someone had to have helped them manage the language barriers and the cultural barriers.

Someone had to have hired Joseph for a steadying livelihood those three years in Egypt. Someone had to have helped them make sense of the foreign currency, to make sure they were being paid what they were owed and not overcharged for what they bought.

Someone had to have befriended them—for who can go without friends for three years? Someone had to have taken an interest in them, cooed at their growing baby, and loaned their buckets at the village well.

It simply isn't possible that these three people could have done what the story says they did with but a momentary angelic intervention. It would have required a whole community of strangers along the way. The story doesn't mention any of this, but perhaps because it would have been assumed. If *our* assuming, though, didn't have us imagining all that, then it's good to have taken this time to think it all through.

Angels aren't the only ones empowered to do the miraculous.

Angels aren't the only ones charged with performing God's will.

In Matthew's gospel, as in this story this morning, it's always God's actions that initiate human activity. But it's never that God's actions make irrelevant human activity. It's never that God's activity makes inessential human response. No, the fact of an active God who is also merciful and just, who is indeed love, doesn't make unimportant the charge that human beings are also to be merciful and just, are indeed to be love. The fact that miracles and wonders guide and protect this new family doesn't mean that plain old people need not do the same. On the contrary, it means those plain old people have the opportunity to participate in the miraculous, have the chance to be the very sign and wonder that we might pray to happen and hope to witness.

This is true not just as regards these storied, well-scrubbed three. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, whom we know as both in need and deserving of protection and assistance, aren't the only ones whom we'd be right to protect and assist. No, of course, such things we should have on offer for any and all people who find themselves vulnerable amidst a crisis, vulnerable amidst powers and principalities that have no regard human life, vulnerable for merely being actual people who actually want simply to live.

Simply being human these days feels to me like a particular challenge, a pressing charge.

It's a new year, and it will be a happy one in many ways. It will also be a difficult one, perhaps a grievous one. The refugee crisis of Syria continues. The cease-fire in Aleppo is fragile and just one glimmer of mercy amidst what the UN has described as a "meltdown of

humanity.” ISIS, Iran, Russia are all implicated in the abandoning of humanity and the embrace of nihilism. But so is the whole world. So is the United States.

And speaking of Russia: the fact of their interference in our government and of a collective indifference to the fact; along with the fact of dictators such as Putin feeling empowered by the coming Trump administration; and the fact of the coming Trump administration and what it will mean for the global climate agreement, the continued steady existence of NATO, the understanding that statecraft and diplomacy are more delicate matters than simply making deals and pushing through transactions, the basic trust that United States has for the last century had in the eyes of the world as far as why we use our power, to what end: these are all concerns that aren't going away no matter how many jingle bells we ring and how many times we're assured everything will be terrific, fantastic, great.

So, in a sad and sorrowing way this story is exactly right for beginning the New Year. Christmas is upon us, a season yet unfolding, five more days. The Incarnation of God is real and enfolding, calling even us into the story itself, charging even us with the same urgency that apparently God felt in wanting to be a part of this physical, material, limited, tragic world where love is the most needed, not to mention most powerful, force. But the world will continue to be a place where that same love isn't an easy and comfortable choice but is risky, is high stakes. The world will continue to be a place where the powers and principalities will as ever seek to destroy that which is most deeply human, and often without any reason at all. The world will continue to be a place where sin and evil, these deep and persistent mysteries whose origins we don't know but whose reality we can't deny, will continue to ensnare us.

And yet there is also the miraculous. There is also angelic grace to guide us and there are plain old people who'll protect us—we who will need protection and we who can offer protection.

Herod issued a charge that day long ago that we remember this morning. God also issued a charge, which we remember not just this morning but every morning. Bless us the year ahead, and the day ahead, that we might respond to the right charge.

Thanks be to God.