

Matthew 2: 13-23 Things to Ponder

In the story of Jesus' birth from Luke which forms the basis of the lessons and carols service, the last two verses tell us two important things from Luke's point of view. First, when the shepherds went back to their fields they left praising God for what they had witnessed. Secondly, Mary's response to what the shepherds said had been told to them by the angels was to treasure all their words and ponder them in her heart. It is the humble and lowly who are the hearers of the mighty act of God. In Luke, the story moves from the heavenly acclamation of God's mighty act of redemption to the appearance of the adult Jesus at the river Jordan where he is again identified as the Messiah. My mother was a big fan of Andy Williams. We always watched the Christmas specials in which he and others celebrated the Christmas season on television. Few of the songs were hymns or really related to the Christmas story we find in the gospels. But if we stay in Luke's gospel, a song Williams often sang would seem very appropriate. It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year. It's the hap-happiest season of all. Williams' song is about the secular trappings of caroling and marshmallow toasting and perhaps watching Dickens' A Christmas Carol comprises the scary ghost stories. Because it mentions Christmases of long, long ago, we assume the Nativity of Christ is in there somewhere, but it is not actually mentioned. But still, Luke's gospel presents the birth in terms of celebration; praising, singing, angels winging through the night. All of this paints a glorious picture in our mind. It would be easy to name these occurrences as the treasures Mary pondered in her heart. In the gospel according to Matthew, there are no humble shepherds who arrive at the stable in Bethlehem to check out what the angels have said. In fact, the angels who do appear in Matthew's story after the birth are not singing Gloria but are pronouncing dire warnings. Matthew tells us not about lowly shepherds who seek out the child, but of men from the East who have seen a sign in the skies that a new king has been born to the Jews. The birth of this child has been announced in distant lands by the rising of a new star. Those who observed this are termed wise men from the east often as rulers or kings themselves. In their studies of the skies, they see God's announcement of the birth of the promised one. These men decide that they must go and pay homage to this king who was so important that a star appeared upon his birth. So they gather gifts and set out to the kingdom of Judea, to its capital, Jerusalem so they can offer homage to this newborn king. When they arrive in Jerusalem at Herod's palace, both they and Herod who is the king are confused. They discover there is no new born king in the palace, and Herod isn't aware of a new king being born. The verses immediately preceding our passage tell us that Herod was frightened by this news. He knows that God has promised the people a Messiah so his reaction is to gather the religious leaders together and inquired what they knew about where the Messiah was to be born. Their knowledge indicates that Bethlehem was to be the site, so after inquiring about when the star appeared he sends his visitors on to Bethlehem. He also request that they return once they have identified this child so he can go and also pay homage. The wise men go to Bethlehem and find mother and child and present their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. In our traditional portrayal of the nativity, they arrive while the shepherds are still there, but Matthew does not tell us of any shepherds at all. Scholars often speculate that the arrival of these wise men who come to pay homage to a new king of the Jews only arrived much later—about two years later—using the

parameters that Herod uses as his insurance policy to prevent the ascension of this new king. In a dream God warns these men who have found Jesus not to go back to Herod so they return home by what we are told is another way. But because they had already visited Herod on the way, Herod has a timeline for Jesus' birth—about two years. Our passage begins here and seems to interrupt our joyful celebration. It presents an unwelcome message. There is just no getting around it, this is a very un-Christmas-y passage. It begins, after they had left when an angel appears to Joseph in a dream and warns him to get out of town. The angel tells Joseph: "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." Joseph heeds the warning, gets up and by night takes the child and his mother to Egypt. Matthew presents this as another prophecy fulfilled which stated "Out of Egypt, I have called my son." The warning preserves the life of this special child, but this passage also tells us of the massacre of the infants because in his attempt to prevent the Messiah from fulfilling the prophecy Herod sends soldiers to kill all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old and under. This is a very disturbing text. It is one which we would often like to ignore—or sugar coat by doubting its reality for lack of documentation. I'm not sure how people of faith are able to ignore this truth, but it happens. Another facet of this story is it reminds us that the boy Jesus was taken from his home in the dead of night, fleeing destruction, a refugee. Not all of the suffering that Jesus endured happened on the cross. He lived as a refugee in Egypt. When his family returned to Judea, he lived as a member of an oppressed people. God sent warnings to Joseph so that Jesus' ministry on earth could be fully accomplished, but we still have to face the reality that his birth did not bring peace to the region. These are not images of joy and light, not images we like to consider as part of the gospel narrative or as part of our current world. In fact, I think this text is important to remind us that in this world it is often the most vulnerable who are made the victims of the powerful like Herod. Somehow we have to deal with the reality that even at this time of year there is sadness and tragedy. And the tragedy is often based in the same roots of fear, greed, hate and the desire to gain or maintain power. The three usual ways to reconcile the existence of suffering in the world around us are these. The first way is to dismiss suffering altogether by concentrating on the wonderful things that have happened. Concentrate really hard on the positive and you tune out the negative. The unfortunate reality of this choice is that ignoring the existence of evil, ignoring the existence of needless pain and suffering doesn't make them go away. Concentrating on the positive is hopeful, but it is a shallow hope. We accept a beautiful lie in place of the truth. And when the truth breaks through, we are left without any hope. The second frequent manner with which people engage with the existence of pain and suffering is the converse of the first. Some people proclaim that needless suffering is just a reality of life. Injustice, poverty, war and barbarism have existed throughout history so these are just the constants of the human condition. Between the news media and the internet it seems that these are days when it is evident that evil and suffering have the final word and there is nothing to be done about it. The Herods of this world are just too powerful. This is a seductive view because it relinquishes all hope and leads to misery and despair. It also relieves us of any burden to act in ways that counter that message given out by the world. The third way which we can use to face the reality of a broken world is through the hope we have in Christ. We can reconcile the existence of evil with our hope for a future where swords are

turned into plowshares, spears become pruning hooks and war is no more as promised to us. This seems to be the way found in our Scriptures. The ones we read in preparation for Christmas. This text from Matthew calls us to fully acknowledge the gravity of the injustice, violence and inhumanity that plague our world. But Scripture calls us to dare to proclaim hope anyway despite the reality of this broken world. This is the true meaning of Christmas. As Christians each year we proclaim hope born into this world because as we look around we see this world is in such great need of hope. This is probably the most foolish of ways to deal with the reality we see: to look at the brokenness of this world, to not minimize it, but to dream of a tomorrow when God's kingdom will come. When we celebrate the birth of God into the world we don't often put it together with the reason that we need God's presence with us is because in so many ways, the world is such a huge mess. In the face of all that brokenness we proclaim the birth of peace. We proclaim the birth of love. We proclaim the birth of justice. And the most amazing part of it all is that we proclaim that it comes through the birth of a baby. When we image heroes who are going to conquer the bad guys, who are going to come to the rescue, who are going to defeat all the evil powers of the world, what is the description most often given by writers of the stories? It is usually some mix of Chuck Norris, Sly Stallone, Vin Diesel, and Bruce Lee. We are conditioned to believe that the way to change the world is through force. But in reality, violence simply begets more violence. No matter how noble the cause violent solutions have a tendency to result in misery and rarely accomplish their intended purpose. But Christmas does bring us hope. It offers to us an opportunity to escape this "might makes right" mentality that we seem to have as our default position. Christmas and what it means offers an opportunity to subvert the cycle of violence. Our savior, as depicted in the gospels does not enter the world as a conquering hero, but as an infant. Jesus manifests as the very symbol of the pure and fragile, yet also unmistakably powerful, life-changing love of God. The birth of Jesus declares God's commitment to this world and to humanity. His birth is a promise that this all-encompassing, ground shaking love can and will transform this planet into the Kingdom of God's reign. It is a promise that the light of Christ will illuminate all who stand in darkness. It is a promise that there will come a day in which the innocent no longer suffer. God does not call us to be consoled. God calls us to move forward in hope toward a day when consolation will no longer be needed. This is not an easy hope or a simple promise. It requires that we dare to believe in the power of love to overcome all. It requires that we dare to believe that the love we share with others will truly make a difference. With God's love for the world in our hearts we can dare to believe that love can change the world. We are called to love and hope and be witnesses to the power of those things through God's presence in this broken world. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.