

Christmas Story Chapters We Ignore

This time of the year is one when we focus on joy, on celebrating the wonder of God's love revealed to us in scripture. This is a time we relish the news of the angel's song of peace and good will while hoping that the prophet Isaiah's image of God's reign will soon become more evident in the world around us. In our advent journey of preparation we try to look beyond the natal event to the hope that God's reign is on its way to becoming our reality while seeking to understand what that means and why it is taking so long to appear among us. We look to Luke's gospel narrative for our telling of the story of Emmanuel and do not spend time on Christmas Eve or Day listening to what the narration of Matthew has to reveal. Matthew's narration of the birth is too brief for us; we only visit it long enough to extract the information about those foreigners...those gentiles...who have followed that amazing star so far. In an Advent sermon titled *"The Coming of Jesus in Our Midst,"* Dietrich Bonhoeffer made this provocative statement about our tendency to turn the incarnation into sentimentality: *"We have become so accustomed to the idea of divine love and of God's coming at Christmas that we no longer feel the shiver of fear that God's coming should arouse in us. We are indifferent to the message, taking only the pleasant and agreeable out of it and forgetting the serious aspect, that the God of the world draws near to the people of our little earth and lays claim to us. The coming of God is truly not only glad tidings, but first of all frightening news for everyone who has a conscience."* For as we have added the wise men to the scene at the manger we tend to forget that while they followed the star and arrived in Palestine, they arrived not to see the newborn infant, but missed the manger as their destination by about nine miles. We have adapted even the Lukean story to some extent. Joseph's family's town of Bethlehem was indeed a small village, but our image of a crowded inn is a romanticized one. Inns as such did not exist in the Judean experience; no crowded Hotel 6 type place existed. Instead, Joseph would have sought shelter with his family still living there. Since all descendants had to return to their homes of origin, it would not be surprising that all the guest bedrooms were indeed occupied before the couple arrived. The family thus offered shelter to the couple in the place where their animals would have sheltered. If you go to the site that Constantine's mother Helen identified as Jesus' birthplace you will find it within a cave-like place beneath the church built on the site. The couple God chose to care for the infant Jesus were members of a typical, poor peasant family. Archeology in the region reveals that homes in the region were often made within caves. Thus any animals the family possessed would be sheltered in an area within it, where a niche would be formed from which the animals would feed. Those traveling astrology students bringing gifts to honor a new king would not have been expecting to find such a significant birth to be among the peasants, so to some extent it is not surprising that they suddenly ignored the star which they had followed to show up at the palace of the current king in the region...Herod's home in Jerusalem—nine miles away from their proper destination. The story of their coming to honor this birth is the part of the Matthew narrative that we like which accounts for their presence in our nativity scenes. Yet their arrival happened much later than the night the star rose; in fact as we read of it, it seems to have taken them somewhere around two years to arrive in Palestine. Joseph and Mary seemed to have remained in Bethlehem with family for this period, so when these foreigners arrived and knocked on Herod's door so to speak, they were still in the area. It is the fallout from their abandoning

following the star to go to the current ruler's home that forms the narrative Matthew tells and which we like to ignore. Our gospel reading this morning begins after they have gotten the appropriate location from Herod and have started their own journey home. Matthew tells us: "now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and 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." Within this text threats abound which lead us to consider the tenuous and dark days which occur between promises and their fruition. We are shown by Matthew how God carefully orchestrates Jesus' early days because as an infant Jesus cannot act in his own defense. This passage shows God's steady protection and Joseph's faithful obedience combine to ensure Jesus' safety in a world of danger. From the very beginning of his life, the road Jesus walks is marked by both God's promises and human resistance. Jesus is both the living presence of God's promises and also a consistent irritant and threat to those in power. Jesus' welcome into this world is not the unanimous acclamation shown in Luke's narrative but includes the fear that this child would subvert the order which exists in this world; that his mere child would grow to weaken the powerful. These threats to the child that Herod makes bristle with authenticity for such tyranny was well known to ancient peoples. In the midst of the joys of the Christmas season, these passages are a ripe reminder that things might have been otherwise, that tragedy and disappointment are too often the order of the day, but Matthew assures us through his trust in God's promises that what God had promised was fulfilled. What we don't like to think about is that the passages Matthew gives us, although are disturbing, are probably closer to the reality of this world, then and now. Because the thing is, Jesus' birth upset the order. He comes as God's chosen king, the one who is to bring about the peace, justice, and equity of God's reign. And so all earthly kings who put their own power and privilege first are terrified. Herod's reaction is a good, but by no means a lone example. Herod is so terrified of the promise that God will, in this child, restore peace and justice that he is willing to slaughter the infants of a whole region. Since Joseph is warned by an angel and flees this carnage and moves his family to Egypt the feared child remains safe. This grim account of wholesale massacre and night flights to safety would seem to be far-fetched if it were not for similar atrocities and tragedies happening right now. Matthew does not dwell on this period in Jesus' life, the consequences of the truth that this family fled and sought asylum. We rarely make the connection that Jesus' early life had much in common with many having the same experiences in our world...whole families or just women with their children or just children being sent away from danger who take enormous risks to reach safety each and every day during the year we just ended. Even worse we are so enmeshed in the narrative of the powerful in our world it is very likely that the situation will remain unchanged in this year which begins today. Today is the last Sunday of the Christmas season within church liturgy. Next Sunday we will go back and consider why those eastern visitors arrived to visit and recognize the arrival of the Messiah promised to the Hebrew people as we think about Epiphany and move on to look at the adult Jesus' arrival at the Jordan River which signals the beginning of his ministry and teaching among us. But truly the Christmas story which begins with the birth of a child doesn't end until that child has grown up, preached God's mercy, been crucified and died and then raised again. Truthfully, it doesn't actually end until Jesus has drawn us all into that same story, raising us up to new life even amid the very real challenges that face each of us here and now. The story matters because it tells us the truth, the

sometimes difficult truth of unjust rulers and violence and private grief and personal pain and all the rest of the details Matthew's account gives us. These details matter because they include the hopeful truth that God has not and does not stand back at a distance, but in Jesus has joined God's own self to our story and is working—even now, even here—in the mess of world where people in Ukraine, Syria, Iran, Haiti, Venezuela and other places are under threat, where many live under oppressive tyrants and need to flee for safety. We have the truth of God's working within the mess of our world to grant us new life that humanity may not just endure but flourish; that we all may come to experience resurrection joy and courage in our daily lives and sharing our hope with others. Bonhoeffer's concern that we fail to acknowledge or connect with the darkness of this truth of the world's resistance to the equity and justice that God's reign means seems valid; the concern inherent is his words that our consciences may be inactive; may be sleeping as we ignore the injustice and lack of equity present in our world desiring to side with the powerful in events happening around us. In reality Herod was no madman seething on his throne. Many of his contemporaries saw him as a savior because he made sure his kingdom would be prosperous, significant and protected within the emerging Roman Empire. Evil rarely presents itself as a beast with horns, fangs and claws. Usually it dresses itself up in respectability. It burrows into systems that we rely on to keep our societies from spinning into chaos. Evil rarely acts alone. Tyranny and arrogance can't exist in a vacuum. They demand accomplices. They survive because their enablers are also contributors to the system. Consider in this passage who would have actually killed the children. Herod would have given the order but he would not have welded the sword. He had people. Agents who would swoop in, pound on doors, and disappear again as quickly as they arrived. How did they benefit from the system which tried to kill the Prince of Peace at almost any cost? Consider the residents of towns near those where mothers were left weeping for lost children. Did the rest of the region just shrug and perhaps hold their children closer; after all the economy was booming. Would it be worth it to risk all that the system gave them by demanding change just because someone else had suffered violence? When we hear the news of our days, when the footage of all the violence around us airs on the TV, how do we respond? Is the basis of our response rooted in the reason the narrative of the results of that visit to Herod forms a story we like to ignore? The birth of Jesus, the coming of Christ into the world, reveals the will of God for all creation: one of reconciliation and not estrangement, peace and not violence, mercy and not cruelty, forgiveness and not shame, grace and not punishment, love and not fear, tenderness and not terror, service and not power, generosity and not hoarding, welcome and not banishment, abundant life and not certain death, goodness and not evil, justice and not exploitation, liberation and not captivity, beauty and not blight, hope and not despair, community and not isolation, joy and an end to all that causes inconsolable weeping. We know without question with the Incarnation which one of these things listed as pairs is in line with God's rule. The question for us, not just at Christmas, but each day as we make our choices, is what then, will we do to create, to participate, to emulate the reign of God in this present moment? In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.