

sermon-12/30/07 Newport Presbyterian Church
“The Rest of the Story”
Matt. 2:13-23

A few months ago I received a phone call from a desperate woman. She was fleeing from her abusive husband. She needed to hide in another town in western Washington where she had never lived. She had dyed her hair so her husband would not recognize her should he see her before she left. She needed money for gas and to buy food. Her fear was palpable over the phone line. Could I please hurry to meet her at the gas station up by the hospital? It did not feel like a scam. I went and Newport helped her with our emergency money from the Deacons.

I thought of her as I read our passage for today. Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus had to flee from an angry man in their day. Jesus, in other words, began his life on earth as a refugee fleeing from violence.

Unfortunately our world is full of refugees fleeing violence in some form or another. Whether we are talking about Darfur, Iraq, or Afghanistan, the situation is the same. Families run for their lives. Sadly, it is only the lucky ones who get to flee with their family intact. Many who do not flee are slaughtered just as surely as Herod's henchmen slaughtered those innocent baby boys around Bethlehem.

In some strange way, it is comforting to read that Jesus was a refugee. The incarnation is all about God coming to us, identifying with us in a human being. Jesus knew our pain because he was human just like us. Not only was he human, he was poor. That carried its own set of problems. He even knew what it was like to be innocent, yet in danger. This story preserved, for us only in Matthew's gospel, shows us a side of Jesus we need to see.

Many of us have not heard a sermon on the slaughter of the innocents. That is what this incident in first century Palestine has come to be called. That is partly because those churches who use the lectionary did not have a chance to preach on it. In past years some of the lectionaries conveniently skipped verses 16-18 in chapter two of Matthew. It was such a downer. Who wants to read about killing babies so close to Christmas? I certainly understand.

Now most lectionaries do include these troubling verses on the first Sunday after Christmas. It is a good thing they do. These verses make the Christmas story real. The full story does not shy away from life in all its grittiness. If the incarnation is going to be something that can change the world, then it has to confront all aspects of the world. Sadly, cruelty, violence, and paranoid leaders trying desperately to hold on to power are all part of the world we inhabit. Thank God Matthew chose to tell this story.

Scholars tell us we do not have any record of this slaughter of the baby boys under two years of age living in the region of Bethlehem. But, they are quick to point out, it would not be out of character for Herod to do such a thing. After all, we do know he had his

wife and three sons executed when he feared they were threatening his power. Emperor Augustus even said at a dinner party, “Gentlemen, better to be Herod’s pig than his son.”

Herod was such a crazy man, Josephus, a first century Jewish historian, tells of Herod’s directive to kill the first born in every family living under his rule. They were to do this right after Herod himself died, so that people would be in the mood to mourn at Herod’s funeral! Fortunately this was not carried out. No, killing every baby boy under the age of two fits right into Herod’s way of doing things.

Why do the lectionaries include this passage? What are we to learn? Is there any good news to be shared? We need to see what Matthew was trying to tell us about Jesus in order to discern any good news.

Commentators point out that Matthew has Jesus traveling a rather steep downward path in his life. He starts out in Bethlehem. Bethlehem is not Jerusalem, but it is the city of David. But then he flees to Egypt. Egypt was where the Israelites knew slavery. Moses, in the Exodus story, led his people to freedom from Egypt. Egypt was a step down from Bethlehem.

Then Herod dies and Jesus’ family wants to return home. But when they return to Israel, they can’t go back to Bethlehem because Herod’s son was ruling there. Instead Jesus, and his family, go to Galilee.

In Isaiah 9:1 we learn that Galilee was called the place of the foreigners. As one scholar put it, Galilee was not a good career move. And worse yet, Jesus moves to Nazareth in Galilee. Nazareth was a place of scorn. You might recall what Nathaniel said about Nazareth in John’s gospel, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Apparently that was a proverbial saying in those days. It would be like a proud New Yorker asking if anything good could come out of New Jersey?

Matthew wants to paint Jesus as moving to the fringes. One commentator said that Matthew envisions disciples of Jesus as living itinerant lives on the edges of the empire. Like Jesus, the Church should see itself as identifying with the poor, the victims of empire, the powerless that seem so expendable when the empire wants something. The Church, at its best, does exactly that when it stands up for farmworkers against large corporate farms and their owners, when it works to end homelessness, or fights for a livable minimum wage.

The good news in all of this is that the empire, even in all its cruelty and power, cannot thwart God’s purposes in Jesus. Joseph is warned in a dream to flee Herod. God’s savior is saved. There may not be any prestige in siding with the poor and powerless, but the Bible consistently affirms that those who live into what it means to be a faithful member of God’s community have resources from God that those who abuse their power can’t finally defeat.

That message is brought home again and again in the Bible. We read how God saves Isaac from human sacrifice in Genesis keeping the promise to Abraham alive. We read how God, through Moses, helps the Israelite slaves flee from bondage in Egypt. Now we read about Jesus being saved from Herod. Jesus is saved at the beginning of his life. Sure, it looks like empire finally wins out at the end of his life when Jesus is crucified. But, the resurrection says that is not true. Cruel dictators don't have the last word.

What does this mean for us who are not refugees, who don't live on the fringes of our society? Will Willimon says when we invite Jesus into our lives and hearts, we cannot go back to life as usual. Those who take their faith seriously are all "refugees," so to speak, from their former way of life.

As you can see, these Biblical stories aren't very safe. Even at Christmas, when we want to hear comforting stories about God with us in a little baby, we end up reading about refugees, about cruel rulers, and about the deep sorrow of those who are the victims of empire.

We are not the same after taking these stories into our hearts. We end up seeing life as a very different journey than the success oriented journey our culture tells us is the best one to travel. We see where downward mobility, if it is in obedience to God's call, may be the best way to bring good news to all the people. We end up seeing that our lives amount to something when we value kindness over prestige, generosity over accumulating wealth, and love over revenge.

That is the rest of the Christmas story. Merry Christmas. Amen