

Like Us
Matthew 2:13-23
Hebrews 2:10-18

In 1998 I had the good fortune to travel to the Holy Land and to visit the church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. Tour buses brought loads of pilgrims to the holy site and street vendors gathered outside the doors of the bus, pressing on us a variety of religious souvenirs – most of them for only “One American Dollar.” With what’s been happening lately with the value of the dollar in foreign markets, they may have upped their price by now, but then for a dollar you could get a set of postcards with assorted pictures of the church; a variety of olive wood crosses, perhaps a scarf.

You have to stoop over to enter into the courtyard of the church. The door is purposely low, built during the time of the Crusades, to prevent men from riding into the sanctuary on horseback, fully armed and ready for a fight. The church itself has beautiful mosaic floors, and smells of incense. And downstairs in a grotto, is the holy place where Jesus is said to have been born. We gathered around the place, now marked by candles and a star imbedded into the rock floor to sing “Silent Night.”

It was a memorable moment, but then we stepped out of the dimly lit church and back into the bright sunlight of Bethlehem, a place of poverty, a place torn by warfare and violence, where children are afraid to play in the streets, and gunfire is likely as not to break out at any time. We were whisked away on our busses before there could be any trouble, and taken to a tourist-safe gift shop to purchase a few higher priced souvenirs before making it safely back to Jerusalem.

It seems on first reflection such an incongruity. The Prince of Peace born in such a violent place. But today’s scripture makes it clear. This is the city where Herod sent his hit-men to find and kill the infant Jesus. This is the town where the mothers of murdered children cried the lamentation of Rachel. Bethlehem is not only the place of the divine mystery of the incarnation, but also the place of real human brutality.

Several years ago, in Bethlehem, a different version of “O Little Town of Bethlehem” was sung:

O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie;
Above thy deep and restless sleep, a missile glideth by;
And over dark streets soundeth, the mortar’s deadly roar;
While children weep in shallow sleep, for friends who are no more.¹

The danger of our sanitized, contemporary Christmas celebrations is that we are enabled and encouraged to forget the reality of violence. In our culture, we emphasize plastic Santas, reindeer, bright lights, and a few benign manger scenes without a hint of King Herod lurking in the background. We tell the Christmas story, combining our favorite parts of Luke and Matthew, so that we can have shepherds, and angels, wisemen and bright stars, but we never include in the telling of our edited and censored story, the shadow that lies over Bethlehem.

I enjoyed this year mindlessly watching, several different versions of Dickens’ “Christmas Carol.” – The very best was the George C. Scott version filmed in the mid-80’s. There was a tie for worst – Vanessa Williams as a rock star who a la Dianna Ross left her struggling back up girls behind to climb the ladder to success, one of those girls becoming, alas – Vanessa’s “Marley’s ghost.” The other one featured Tori Spelling as a self-centered TV celebrity—one might say “type casting?”. Her Bob Cratchit was her female personal assistant, a single mom with a small child to care for. In each version the reformed hero or heroine promises to keep Christmas in their hearts forever after the visitation from various spirits over the evening,

showing them the error of their ways, past, present, and potentially future. And when each was over, you could easily have written “And they all lived happily ever after” across the screen.

And that’s what we’d like to write across our own nativity stories. “They lived happily ever after”– Jesus, Mary, and Joseph – just one happy family, keeping Christmas in their hearts forever. But Matthew is here for the reality check. Jesus wasn’t born into the land of the Sugarplum Fairies. He was born into Bethlehem of Judea – a dark, violent, dangerous place.

There are those who would like to believe that where the messiah is there is no suffering – all is happiness and light, and -- if you ask Creflo Dollar or Joel Osteen – prosperity and wealth for everyone, where you can have everything you want, you just have to ask for it. But Matthew’s message, and indeed the message of all the gospels is, that where suffering is, that is where you will find the messiah.

Matthew wants us to know that God comes to us, is born in us, in the dark places, in the dangerous places, in the hopeless places. Three years ago, when we read this story together, a tsunami had just swept across Indonesia, killing thousands of people. This year, just a few days ago, Benezir Bhutto was assassinated in Pakistan. Out in California this week, a tiger escaped from a zoo enclosure, and mauled and killed two young men before being shot to death. Currently, there are over 50 million refugees in this world; anywhere you look there are victims of violence who do not wear one political brand or bear one national identity. They speak every language; they worship every name of God; the bleed out of every color body. All corners of God’s fragile world are broken and incomplete.²

And it is into this reality that Jesus is born – a world where mothers cry, and babies die, and the holy family must flee for their lives into Egypt and live as refugees. Jesus comes not to escape the tribulation, but to enter it with us, and to love us and this world through it and lead us into healing and wholeness.

That too is the testimony of the Letter to the Hebrews that Linda read earlier. Sometimes the language of that letter is kind of difficult to understand, but this is how Eugene Peterson translates it: “Since the One who saves and those who are saved have a common origin, Jesus doesn’t hesitate to treat them as family, saying “I’ll tell my good friends, my brothers and sisters, all I know about you; I’ll join them in worship and praise to you. Again he puts himself in the same family circle when he says, “Even I live by placing my trust in God.” And yet again, “I’m here with the children God gave me.” Continuing on, the author of Hebrews concludes, “It’s obvious, of course, that he didn’t go to all this trouble for angels. It was for people like us, children of Abraham. That’s why he had to enter into every detail of human life. Then when he came before God as high priest to get rid of the people’s sins, he would have already experienced it all himself – all the pain, all the testing – and would be able to help where help was needed.”

Of the world religions that I know about, in Christianity the deity not only becomes human and lives among the people – a phenomenon that happens in Hinduism, as well as some others – but is the only one where when the going gets tough, the deity stays human, doesn’t fly back to Paradise, or to the Elysian Fields, or Palaces of the Gods, or wherever gods to escape the messiness of human life. This God stays; he suffers; he experiences what we experience.

I shared with the Sunday School class a few weeks ago that this very thing that the letter to the Hebrews proclaims in high flown theological language and that the gospel writers tell in more down to earth narrative form, is what attracted me to Jesus when I went back to church. One Sunday morning – I can still remember the room and where everyone was sitting -- Dottie Haavie, who suffered from multiple sclerosis, shared that her pain was made slightly more bearable by the fact that she knew Jesus had suffered too. And a kind of light bulb went off in my head – Jesus was walking my walk too and he was walking my mother’s walk as she lay dying. And it dawned on me that he wasn’t asking me to do anything that he hadn’t done; my mother wasn’t experiencing anything that he hadn’t experienced. And I decided then, that I liked

this Jesus guy; I could believe in him. He was my kind of God. One who didn't cut and run, but who hangs in there with me and with you and who can say with the authority that comes from having been there, "Follow me."

Sister Joan Chittister writes, "Christmas is a moveable feast, a feast that changes in meaning as we move through life growing more and more aware of its real significance for us. We were born. Jesus was born. What Jesus did to survive life, to bear life, to create life, to become life, we can do as well. Or better: What we do to survive life, to bear life, to create life, to become life, Jesus did before us. Our struggles are not new. Our questions are not senseless. Our burdens are not unbearable.

Christmas, the remembrance of the birth of Jesus, is not a remembrance at all. It is an awareness that grows in us from day to day all our lives." Christmas is the consciousness of eternal Life alive among us; it is a day that never ends.

And she concludes, "Bring on the days of our lives. We have a God who has already walked them and found them holy-making."³ Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ Quoted by Susan R. Andrews in "The Rest of the Story," www.esermons.com.

² Andrews.

³ Sr. Joan Chittister, *In Search of Belief*, rev. ed. Liguori, MO: Liguori/Triumph, 2006, pp.90-92.