

“God on the Run”

Sermon preached at Church on the Hill
Lenox, Massachusetts
First Sunday of Christmas • 1 January 2017
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Text: Matthew 2:13-23

¹³ Now after they had left, an angel of God 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.” ¹⁴ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, ¹⁵ and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by God through the prophet, “Out of Egypt I have called my son.”

¹⁶ When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. ¹⁷ Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: ¹⁸ “A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.”

¹⁹ When Herod died, an angel of God suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, ²⁰ “Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child’s life are dead.” ²¹ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. ²² But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. ²³ There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, “He will be called a Nazorean.”

1

Christmas doesn’t last long really.

The Christmas of comfort and joy, of peace on the earth and goodwill to all, doesn’t last long. By the time we reach December 26th the stores are braced for returns of gifts that don’t fit or don’t work. Decorations start to droop.

Christmas doesn’t last long in the Bible, either. At least not in Matthew’s gospel.

2

The story turns by Joseph’s dreams. You remember his first, from two weeks ago: a messenger of God appeared to the sleeping Joseph and told him to change his plans, alter his thoughts, let go of his intention to break off the engagement with Mary, and instead to be a spouse to her and guardian for the holy child about to be born.

Now, the baby born, with God having taken on that awful vulnerability, Joseph dreams again — only this time it’s a nightmare. The brutal Herod — the king who had led a bloody three year fight to control his realm, who was so wary of opposition and insurrection that he built more than half a dozen fortresses, who apparently never hesitated to murder either enemy or family in

order to consolidate power — that King Herod, said God’s messenger, was about to come for the baby. Flee now. Go to Egypt.

Sometimes God’s call is not to confront, but to escape. The time for confrontation would come later. At this moment in Matthew’s story, it was time to run. The overwhelming wonder of the miraculous birth suddenly became an unreal memory: reality now was danger. The rough shepherds kneeling in adoration, the foreign sages who appeared with extravagant gifts — that all probably seemed like a dream. The reality was nightmare. Herod was headed toward Bethlehem. God went on the run.

The peace that came to earth on Christmas is not all sweetness and light. God’s peace means that God is in charge, and human rulers will see their influence diminish. They will lash out. When peace comes, it will mean tremendous disruption.

We’ve seen it before, as recently as the last time you listened to the news. The rulers of countries get their positions in part because they are interested in wielding power. There is reason to be afraid of them. Whether they have their fingers on a missile launch button, or a Twitter feed, or on the scales of justice, rulers have learned how to use either a weapon or a word to defeat the opposition. Whether they shoot or shout or whisper, earthly rulers know that servants and sycophants are listening and ready to follow their lead and act.

The Herods of the world approve of peace when they get to define it: when it suits their purposes and follows their design. Histories tell us of the famous Pax Romana that existed in Jesus’ day that, “Romans regarded peace not as an absence of war, but the rare situation that existed when all opponents had been beaten down and lost the ability to resist.”

Jesus’ peace causes panic to kings. Jesus’ peace puts presidents on high alert. God undoubtedly knows better than we do the truth of Frederick Douglass’s pithy words: “Power concedes nothing without a demand.” It’s worth remembering Mr. Douglass’s wisdom, 154 years to the day after Lincoln signed the Emancipation proclamation.

3

So Christmas didn’t last long, not in this story. Another prophecy was fulfilled, one filled with dread and tears. Herod slaughtered the innocents of Bethlehem. He did not kill his target. But that was probably no comfort to Rachel, weeping for her slain children, or all of the other mothers and fathers.

If only the Bible had the kind of power that would change the world in an instant! Why was this slaughter not the very last slaughter? How could any human being who read this story ever allow an innocent to die again?

The story does not answer such questions. It keeps a dreadful silence. We humans fill in the silence — either with tears of grief, or with cries of outrage, or with bland, bone-chilling justifications, calling an innocent’s death “collateral damage.”

True peace comes at a hideous cost. Neither tyrants nor apparatchiks give up their power without a fight.

4

Christmas did not last long, and the refugees eventually had a chance to go home. King Herod died. Joseph dreamed. This time, not a nightmare but a reprieve: an angel told Joseph that those who sought to kill the child were themselves deceased. Again Joseph and Mary collected their things and made the long trek north to their homeland. Home! Back where they speak the language and know the customs; back where the food is familiar and they know the streets not by their names but by the families who have lived there for generations.

If this were a “happily-ever-after” story, we could close the book after that last dream. But the Bible goes deeper than that. It never ignores the reality of human nature. Herod is dead, but his son has assumed power. Archelus was no improvement. Joseph was afraid. Yet another dream confirmed his fear and warned him away from Bethlehem. The travel-weary family pushed further north to the remote region of Galilee, and settled in the hill town of Nazareth.

It’s the last we hear of Joseph, that man who listened to his dreams, who embraced his blended family, who became an exile in a strange land rather than risk the life of his adopted son. The child survived to live another day, and eventually to change time itself.

Christmas didn’t last long, but God has accomplished the miracle of inserting peace into a world whose powers are completely unprepared for God’s peace. bottom-up peace, its first beneficiaries those who are crushed by life’s heavy load.

Matthew gives hope for all of us who remember this holy birth.

Hope, because even a most brutal king could not extinguish God’s living Word.

Hope, because even in a police state the power of love could not be terrified into submission.

Hope, because we can still imagine the unnamed strangers and foreigners who sheltered the refugee family on their way.

Hope, because violence can win the day but peace wins eternity.

Hope, because we know that even death itself cannot defeat the Word of life.

5

Yuletide may be past, but the deepest Christmas present has been implanted in you and me. It is the story. The story of hope and peace that has survived every kind of tyranny. The story of hope and peace that thrives in hard times. The story of hope and peace that outlasts every story of decline or despair. The story of the living Word, of Immanuel, God-with-us.

In case this is the first sermon you have ever heard, and in case this is the last one that you ever hear, remember: God’s Christ lives! Let that be the story that you tell without ceasing. Amen.