

Eclipse – When the Light Is Hidden

Matthew 2:13-15

This was not a good week for humanity in the news. I'm not talking about the effects of the big rainstorm that we went through on Thursday, although we could remind ourselves that climate change is the consequence of how we have mistreated the earth for a long time. Weather is the great equalizer; we are no more protected in California than are the people of the Philippines who had to run for their lives last week from the second hundred-year typhoon to hit those islands in the last year.

What I really mean is the anger and violence that came after grand jury decisions about whether police officers in Ferguson, Missouri and Staten Island, New York should be tried in criminal court for using *way too much force* against unarmed black men—enough to kill them. I'm talking about the days and nights of protests after those decisions, and how easily they turned into more violence and looting and using *way too much force* against unarmed shop owners and local police and people living in urban neighborhoods. I'm talking about the report released this week about our government's use of *way too much force*—unimaginable and totally unnecessary torture—in the years following 9-11.

We're kind of a mess.

And here we are in the midst of Advent. What does it mean to welcome God into a world that looks like this? What is the good news of Christmas that we anticipate, that doesn't just ignore the bad news that surrounds us? What does it mean to invite God into this world again, knowing that when God came before, he came as a *baby*; that he was born poor and a racial minority in the empire he lived in; that he was born part of a people who were seen as a threat to the stability of the land? "Don't do it!" you might want to warn Jesus. "It's too dangerous. We're not ready for you."

The story we read this morning is part of Jesus' birth story. It was about the power-jealous king of Judea—Herod. Herod, and his father before him, had been set up by the Empire to rule over this little state for Rome. Scholars are pretty sure Herod was Jewish, so when the wise men came with their astronomical calculations, saying they'd been led to the birthplace of a child who might be the Messiah the whole earth had waited for, Herod recognized the prophecies they were talking about. The birth of a Messiah who might lead the Jewish people into freedom—which meant resistance to the empire that had put this king in place—might be good news for the Jews, but it was very bad news for Herod. The status quo—which can often be mistaken for peace—was at risk. And so Herod did what any frightened dictator would do: he used his power to protect his stability. Using *way too much force*, he ordered his soldiers to murder every male infant and toddler anywhere in the vicinity of Bethlehem...just to make sure they got the right one.

And so, the story of God's birth into this world, the story of Jesus, includes a chapter about escape from danger. One of those same angels who had just been singing about "peace on earth,

goodwill to all” comes down and pulls Joseph aside and whispers in his ear, “Look, you guys have got to get out of here. And I mean now.” So Joseph and Mary packed up whatever small set of belongings they had, and their baby, and they fled to Egypt, where they lived as refugees...much like the hundreds of thousands of Syrians who are living today in refugee camps in Turkey, or Central American children housed in detention centers in Texas.

I tell you this story, and I think Matthew told it as part of his Gospel, not so much for the historical record. Like many stories in the Bible, scholars cannot document that this “slaughter of the innocents” (as it has been called) actually happened. But whether it is historically factual is not the point here. *This* story is told because it says something important about the world Jesus entered. The beautiful story of Christmas has an ugly scar right across its face, to remind us that it is not just a sweet fairy tale about a made-up world.

And in that genius that always surprises me when we dig into the Bible, there’s another layer of meaning in this story as well. It’s not coincidental that Egypt is the place Joseph and Mary and their baby fled to. Matthew’s readers—and we, if we’ve paid attention to the Old Testament story that came before—will recognize Egypt as the place that the Jews—Jesus’ ancestors—escaped *from*, when Moses led them out of slavery, through the Red Sea, and into forty years in the wilderness before they got to the promised land that now has Herod as its king. We are meant to remember the whole history, including this piece: that in the days of slavery, Pharaoh—king of Egypt—instructed his soldiers to kill every Hebrew male child under two. Because of his mother was clever and resourceful, the baby Moses escaped from that death sentence; and he grew up to lead his people out of slavery and into freedom.

How intentionally ironic, that the land that once held misery and death for Jesus’ people now becomes the place that shelters him from extermination in his own homeland. And how intentionally realistic, this picture of the world the presence of God was born into, a world that holds not only joy and promise, but chaos and darkness. We are meant to notice the holy family’s escape, and that even Herod’s cruelty and competition and arrogance could not defeat God’s mission in Jesus.

But maybe we are also meant to notice that every other baby boy in Bethlehem was murdered. It’s almost unthinkable, isn’t it: the slaughter of innocent children to satisfy an insecure tyrant. A pattern: how easy it is and how destructive it is, for we humans to use *way too much force* to crush the people and things that frighten us. Christians tell a story in which our hero is saved, carried safely to Egypt and back when the coast is clear. But let us stop and remember all those other boys, the ones who are often left out of our story, children whose tiny bodies were snapped broken by Herod’s soldiers. Let us also feel the worry of parents of black boys in this country who have reason to be terrified every time a police car pulls into traffic behind them or speaks to them on the street. Let us know the despair of refugees who really might never find anything that feels like home again.

The story of Herod reminds us that even in the beautiful story of Christmas, there was bad news, right alongside the good. It was true then, just as it is true now. But there’s another way of saying the same thing: there is good news, right alongside the bad. The kingdom of God is among you, Jesus said when he began to preach. *And* he taught his disciples to pray, “thy

kingdom come...on earth as it is in heaven...please.” At every moment, the hope of creation is already here, *and* it has not yet arrived.

Emmanuel, God-with-us, light of the world, has come already. He has brought light into our darkness. And still there are moments—lots of moments—when the light can seem almost entirely eclipsed by all that junk that gets in its way: war, poverty, racism, abuse of power. Those smaller and more personal darkneses: grief, fear, addiction, anger. There are moments when the light is obscured, almost invisible. But it has never been extinguished.

And so, we *choose* to live as people of the light, people whose work it is to push aside all that junk, to point to the light that is already among us, but is sometimes hidden. I had a friend from seminary, Toni Dunbar, who grew up on the south side of Berkeley, a mostly-black neighborhood where the police hovered closely, often stopping people unnecessarily, not being there when they were really needed. Even before she finished seminary, Toni went to work as a chaplain to the Berkeley police department—so that she could know and understand those police officers. So that they could know and understand someone like her, the people in her neighborhood. Her willingness to cross that line, to carry the light inside of her into a dark place, spoke more than any protest.

I see the same persistent light in so many ways around here. In the Art & Spirit ministry, where every month people from our congregation keep going back to the Elmwood County Jail, carrying hope like one of those little flashlight headlamps, so that the inmates there can see it too. In the work you do: you who care for children—your own or someone else’s—who could not thrive without you. You who teach, and who are social workers and nurses and judges. You who bring humanity into accounting and engineering and corporate life. You who use your retirement to serve others. With your lives, you are telling the story: the light has come.

Look: the light is coming again. In every week of our Advent journey together, we are watching the light grow. God’s coming draws near again. We should be standing on our tiptoes, as we search the skies for the dawn that will break, on this earth, and inside of us. Come, thou long-expected Jesus.