

SERMON
1st Sunday of Christmas

December 30, 2007

Isaiah 63:7-9
Psalm 148
Hebrews 2:10-18
Matthew 2:13-23

Brothers and sisters in Christ, grace to you and peace from God the Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

As most of you know by now, I believe that it is important that we follow, for the most part, the prescribed church lectionary readings for each Sunday. That way, we as pastors, aren't able to always pick and choose what Scripture passages we wish to speak about due to our own personal agendas.

But it also means that sometimes we are forced to address stories that we might rather forget about. Today is one of those days.

It was less than a week ago that we celebrated the birth of Jesus. We sang songs proclaiming the beauty and wonder of the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes. We held the baby Jesus in our arms and looked into his eyes to see the heart of God. We told the story of God's gracious gift of his Son who came to bring salvation to all who believe.

We got together with family and friends. We shared gifts with each other and no doubt ate a little more than we should have.

Now most of us have probably heard the saying, "all good things must come to an end." Well, Wednesday morning came, and many of us went back to work. Soon school will be back in session. Many of our guests have returned home.

We are now behind on our household chores. The laundry baskets are full, the dishes are stacked in the sink, the bedrooms are a mess, the bathrooms need to be cleaned, the bills need to be paid. Welcome back to reality.

Soon the Christmas tree will come down, if it hasn't all ready. The decorations will be carefully wrapped and put away until next year. The songs of Christmas will be filed away for another day. The diets will begin again, and the exercise machines will be pulled back out from where they had buried under all of the Christmas stuff.

But before we go on, let us for a moment, reflect one more time on the events of that glorious night long ago. The night when Jesus was born in Bethlehem.

At that moment in time, it seemed that the whole world was at peace. At least, that is what we would like to imagine. We heard the heartwarming story of a desperate family looking for a place to sleep. Finding no room at the inn, they finally ended up in a quiet stable where Mary gave birth to her firstborn son.

She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger. There were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.

Suddenly, an angel of the Lord stood before them and announced; “Do not be afraid; for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Messiah, the Lord.” Remember the Children’s Christmas program, telling again this wonderful story from Luke’s gospel.

By the way, do you ever wonder why Luke’s account of the Christmas story became the standard for our Christmas celebration? Why not Matthew, or Mark, or John?

Well, it could be because Luke has all of the great lines: the shepherds “watching over their flock by night,” the angels’ comment about “good news of great joy,” the image of a baby “wrapped in swaddling clothes,” the heavenly host singing “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom God is pleased.”

It could also be due to the fact that the other gospel accounts aren’t nearly as dramatic and colorful. Mark’s gospel, for example, doesn’t even have a story about the birth of Jesus. It simply starts with Jesus being baptized in the Jordan River.

And John’s story takes what you might call the high, metaphysical approach to Jesus’ birth, identifying Jesus not as a babe born to a virgin and laid in a cow trough. But rather, as “logos,” as “Word,” who was with God, who was God, who was in the beginning of all creation with God.

“All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made.” It would have been kind of hard to create a children’s play around that sort of story.

That leaves Matthew’s storyline. And Matthew presents an altogether different problem. Three-fourths of the way through Matthew’s account of Mary and Joseph and Jesus’ birth is this episode:

“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. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: ‘A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they were no more.’”

Well, who wants to have this as part of their Christmas story? I know of no Christmas carols that remember Rachel’s holiday experience.

Hallmark sells no card depicting the “slaughter of the innocents.” This part of the story is never included as part of the television specials.

But you see, the shouts of soldiers, the cries of children, and the wailing of their mothers are also part of the season no matter how much we would like to forget about it.

Therefore, we do not only hear about angels and shepherds and wise men who come bearing gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. But we also hear about a jealous king and his hatred, and little children being murdered.

So what do we do with this story of violence and death? What do we do with this woman named Rachel that Jeremiah prophesies about? What will we do with the Spirit’s plea through this sister’s scorched voice? How can we sip eggnog, unwrap presents, sit by the warm glow of a fire without hearing the wailing and weeping in the background?

The answer is; we mustn’t, indeed we cannot. For to do so would ignore the fact that the gospel that Jesus brought is truly a scandal to the world. The message of Jesus causes us to see a world that is broken, and a God that is committed to healing that brokenness.

And the amazing thing is, is that God has decided to heal this brokenness, not by himself, but by partnering with His people. In other words, God has chosen you and me to be instruments of change and reconciliation.

We are the ones that God has called to be peacemakers – to be voices for the poor and the oppressed – to be those who comfort those who mourn and visit those who are sick.

In an article written for Sojourners Magazine, Ken Sehested wrote: “It is Rachel who calls out to the majority culture in North America. Only at her side will we begin to comprehend the gospel of our Lord. Any shout of Christmas good cheer that has not been spoken within listening distance of Rachel’s voice is nothing more than sentimental drivel.”

For anguish is still very much a part of the Christmas scene today. There are many who are suffering, many who are lonely, and many who are grieving. Just this past week, we heard the mourning and wailing in Pakistan after the assassination of Benazir Bhutto.

For many in the world, perhaps today’s scripture reading was more meaningful than the peaceful baby in a manger. Perhaps they could better relate to Rachel weeping for her children who were no more.

The Jewish author Eli Weisel was a slave laborer in a WWII German concentration camp. He writes about the Holocaust and the things that happened to him during the war.

“One evening,” he writes, “we returned after a day of slave labor to discover that three gallows had been erected in the center of the camp. Three prisoners were going to be executed and the guards had orders to force all of the other prisoners to stand and watch the executions.

Two of the victims were men. But to our horror, we saw that the third was only a small boy. Nooses were put around their necks, and all three were made to stand up on chairs. Then, the chairs were kicked out from underneath them.

The two men died instantly as the weight of their bodies broke their necks. But the little boy was so light that his neck did not break. And there he hung, gasping for breath, dangling at the end of the rope. And the prisoners were forced to stand there and watch him for more than 30 minutes, until he finally died.

As we watched in terror, one of the men behind me cried out, “you say that there is a God? Then where is He? Where is He now?” Weisel wrote; “I turned back and looked at him and said, ‘there he is. He is hanging at the end of a rope.’”

And I believe that this is where we find our hope as Christians – Emmanuel, “God with us,” in all of our circumstances.

You see, evil has been part of God’s creation since the time he first gave us freedom to choose. Therefore, as long as we have the freedom of choice, evil will always exist.

And because of evil there was death on that night so long ago in Bethlehem when the cries of children pierced the night air – innocent children, victims of a selfish, fearful king.

But there was one child who was saved – one child who was carried off into Egypt. A child who was destined to be the Savior of the world. A child who would show us the very heart of God. A child who would one day become a victim himself. But his death would be different than any other. He would die on a cross, not for his own sins, but for the sins of others.

But that is not the end of the story. For this small baby who once lay in a manger and now flees for his life will someday rise from the dead with a power never seen before.

And that power of the resurrected Christ now lives in us through the work of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, God has given us the means to stand up against the evils in the world. God has made it possible for you and me to be agents of change so that God's kingdom can come to us today, and not just in the life to come.

For we are not called sit on the sidelines and watch as the evil in our world wreaks havoc. We are not called to retreat from the world until it's time for us to go to heaven. But instead, God calls us to be active agents of change in the world – standing for God's purposes and against evil.

And this is why he sent his Son – to be a light unto the world. For as we are told by the prophet Isaiah, “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light... For unto us a child is born.” Amen.

May the peace that passes all understanding be with you now and for life everlasting. Amen.