

A Sermon for DaySpring
by Elizabeth Brown
A Christmas Ache
Matthew 2:13-23
January 1, 2023

Well, the presents have been opened, and the guests have gone home. The baby has arrived; the angels sang their glorious song in the night sky that God's promise had been fulfilled. As the glow of Christmas begins to settle, the holy family does too. The child grows, and as far as we know, nothing else remarkable happens. They simply settle into being a new family. Until one day, something does happen. I want you to imagine something with me - you can close your eyes or not if you prefer, but take a moment with me to really settle into this story:

Imagine: Something wakes you up, and you know in your gut you have to protect your family. This messenger has proven trustworthy before, but yet it was in a dream, was it only a dream? The threat is such that you are willing to uproot your family, leave the home you've made, the life you've built, and flee. Egypt will be the place. It's foreign to you, but you hope that there you may be able to find the safety and security that is threatened now. But there's no time to figure that out, so you just go, leaving everything familiar because you'll do anything to keep them safe. Maybe you have doubts about the warning, but you decide to trust and to go.

Joseph is warned in a dream that the child Jesus is in danger. They flee to the safety of Egypt, and Herod tries to thwart God's plans by ordering the death of the young boys of Bethlehem.

We've acknowledged before that Christmas for all its glory and splendor has an ache to it. I don't know exactly why but for me it seems to get a little more poignant each year. Here in our text today we have a story that reminds us that there has always been sorrow in the background of Christmas. As I was preparing for today, I came across lots of explanations and lessons we could try to take from this story, and to be quite honest, most of them didn't quite land for me. There were some that tried to make an example of Joseph - his family blessed for his obedience. I just don't think that's the whole story. Nobody seemed to quite know what to do with the horribleness of what happened after the wise men came. It certainly isn't the part of the Christmas story we see in our pageants or sing about in our carols.

Between Christmas and Epiphany, we tend to skip what happens after the wise men come. They bring gifts to the newborn king, but unintentionally bring Herod's eye to the perceived threat to his own power. It's a rescue story, God's divine intervention to protect his Son, the faithful obedience of Joseph and Mary to heed the warning and run and Jesus is saved. But it is also a terrible story of innocent victims left behind.

The birth of the messiah is such a big deal that creation itself declares its coming. Even the stars have proclaimed it, and the shining stars praise his name. Creation groans for the birth of God's kingdom, and the earthly powers tremble at its coming. Three kings from afar take note of this celestial declaration, and they travel - we don't know how far - to come see for themselves.

When they arrive in Bethlehem, they do the humanly practical thing in interpreting this message as the coming of an earthly king, and so they go to Herod - the earthly ruler to see what has happened. The signs are there, but in their humanness, they can only understand what they know. They understand that a king has been born. How would they know to look in a stable?

Somehow, we miss the coming of God's kingdom because we expect it to look like power that we understand. But God's kingdom comes, and we miss it because it doesn't look like that at all. Herod feared this news because he interpreted the message of the magi as a threat to his earthly power. It is always the most vulnerable people who bear the brunt of this fear. And yet God's kingdom came as one of them. The kingdom looked like them, and so they bore it. The suffering of the innocent always lays bare power's corruption. Herod may have abused his power long before he ordered this horrible act, but it is in this act that we see how deep the corruption goes. A wise person once said, "People who try to bend power to their will, always wind up bent."

But God intervenes. In a dream, God warns Joseph and tells him to go. It doesn't take an angel to spur parents to act this way when their children are in danger. Joseph and Mary do what so many people throughout history have done to give their children a chance. They seek refuge.

The act of defiance to power in this story is the act of the refugee. You see, refugees are not the problem, but point to the problem of the powers that be, they are a sign of greater trouble in the world and have always been a witness to this with their own embodiment of Jesus' own story. Their prophetic act of courage demands that we see the world at odds with the Kingdom of God.

When they arrived in Egypt, were they met with kindness and hospitality? Did they have connections or did they start from scratch? How did they make a new home in this new place?

In St. Peter's Square, there is a recently unveiled sculpture. A boat is full of people standing shoulder to shoulder on a journey toward a new future. The figures span history: a native man on the trail of tears, a pregnant woman fleeing communism, a Jewish man fleeing Nazi Germany, a Syrian child fleeing war, one hundred and twenty figures represent the fact that this is a human experience that any one of us could find ourselves in depending on chance - our place or time of birth. In the middle of the figures is an angel, and the title of the sculpture is "Angels Unawares" a reminder that in showing hospitality, some have hosted angels. Who in Egypt hosted the Son of God?

What do we do with the rest of this story? How do we reconcile the loss of life? I suppose the good news is that this story is here. It is not forgotten. They are not forgotten. It acknowledges that Jesus has come, and suffering is still here. It doesn't take much living to realize that suffering is still with us. But the writer of Hebrews tells us that suffering is not outside of our faith's scope. The passage says "Because he himself was tested by what he suffered; he is able to help those who are being tested." It doesn't try to explain away suffering or escape it, but it tells us that Jesus entered the world as one of us, as our brother. And he suffered as we suffer so that he could act as our high priest. As one who knows what it's like to be one of us.

Maybe it's worth noting that Mary would suffer the same loss as the other mothers of Bethlehem did that night. The powers that be would take her son too.

I don't know about you but speaking from my own experience, my faith doesn't work if it can't hold suffering. We've all had those moments - or will - of feeling like we've been left behind by the good news. Or we've come to that place where what we thought we knew, we just don't anymore. It's achingly hard to imagine the grief of the mothers in Bethlehem that night. Maybe not so hard for some. Why weren't they all rescued? If an angel could warn Joseph, why not all of the families? If God can answer prayers, why didn't he answer mine?

The answer is in the cross. Faith holds water when it can hold suffering, and when we gloss over these stories - in the bible and in our own lives and our life here together - we water down the true strength of the gospel. Jesus suffered. YES, he was victorious, and we are victorious with him. But escaping suffering isn't the goal of this life or this faith, but it can hold it. Jesus didn't ride into this world on a great white horse and declare victory over this world. He entered it in our most vulnerable form - a baby whose life was sustained by the very ones he himself created - God put Godself into creation's hands. He suffered by our hands.

When suffering comes near, questions arise. At least, they do for me. But I've found that the victorious messages of living "blessed" and trying to escape life's realities doesn't hold up for long. What I've found is here in this truth from Hebrews: *He enters our suffering*. There's no crack in the floorboards you can fall through and not be found by the cross. That is, when we lose all hope of finding God, when we come to the end of ourselves, we find that we haven't found the end of God and our savior. He still holds us.

This is a story of rescue, miracle, atrocity, and loss. This is the human experience and our savior's. Thanks be to God.

Copyright by Elizabeth Brown, 2023