

First Sunday of Christmas
December 26, 2010
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Scriptures: Isaiah 63:7-9, Psalm 148, Hebrews 2:10-18, Matthew 2:13-23

The Joy of Christmas

Who can say that Christmas is not a time of joy? People are out in the streets and businesses are making their best sales of the year. Many people invoke that which they call “the Christmas Spirit” — I have the suspicion that not so many know exactly what that is — and they smile to people they don’t even know, families gather together to eat (and sometimes to fight) and they all exchange presents. And then there’s music. From the traditional carols, going through our beloved hymns, to the greatest compositions of Bach and Handel, music is probably the favorite expression of the Christmas joy. Because the joy of Christmas becomes praises to God, it is prayer made acclamation. He who sings prays twice, they say, because in it we express our gratitude for all that God has done for us.

We Christians of the twenty-first century have a problem: our Christmas tradition, through the millennia, has made into a sort of fairy story what we hear from the gospels. Instead of a tired, achy and sweaty mother that has just gone through childbirth, we hear of a beautiful virginal maiden, placidly sitting by her son. Jesus is not a wrinkly, blood covered newborn. He looks more like a classic Gerber baby with rosy cheeks. The shepherds, instead of the dirty, smelly, despised people they were, have become the little shepherds we find in poems and children stories. And the foreign astrologers, who were gentiles not included in the chosen people, are now the camel traveling wise men that bring gifts to children around the world.

All of the sudden, in the midst of that dreamy Bethlehem of the movies and Christmas pageants, we find a series of images that don’t necessarily correspond to our imagination. These we have had no way to sugar-coat, and they are the ones we have precisely read about in the gospel for today. We hear of a hurried escape to Egypt, the killing of the innocents in Bethlehem, and an eventual return to a land that is now strange and different. A small family persecuted by a tyrant that is only set on keeping his power and now is afraid of them because supposedly the little baby represents a danger. But it is they who are in mortal danger so they hurry in the middle of the night as if they were criminals. They go to a foreign country becoming illegal immigrants. In their trail, a whole generation of infants lay dead while the moans of their mothers cannot be appeased. What’s wrong with this scene and why do we hear of it in the midst of “the most wonderful time of the year?”

In reality Christmas doesn’t have much to do with the beautiful pageants we see in our churches. The stories about the infancy of Jesus have been written against the backdrop of those stories from the Old Testament. You can imagine it as a series of images, each of them related to others that remain hidden. In order for you to discover the whole story, you have to stop at each image and look where they have come from. There you find a

people enslaved in Egypt by another power-hungry and scared tyrant. Like Herod, Pharaoh wants to kill them because they might become a threat to him. And then hundreds, thousands, of dead children. Hebrew children are thrown in the river to drown and Egyptian children fall victim to the most terrible of all plagues. They all died so that others could be saved. This is the story against which the Christmas story is written. And it continues until this very day. A long list of men, women and children who to this day are persecuted, threatened, and even put to death. This is not what we see in the Christmas pageants.

What we have here is a different picture of God. This Christmas scene brings before our eyes an all powerful God who is powerless against the powers that be. God is shown as a helpless little boy that is totally dependent on the protection that his parents can provide him. He is vulnerable and is made to share the destiny of millions of others who need to be helped and rescued. This Christmas story asks that we look at a God in mortal danger, a real kind of danger, the kind that erases your existence, leaving you lifeless to rot under the hot sun of the dessert. An unfair and unjust kind of death, maybe like every other kind of death is.

There are some I know who wonder how God could stand by and let all those babies die, while allowing Jesus to escape. But the thing is that Jesus does not escape. Jesus does not get out of this. His sentence is just delayed, not commuted. God in Jesus chooses to enter the world as a child, and there is only one exit strategy from such a cataclysmic decision. God in Jesus must die. God in Jesus will die. Just not in this massacre. First Jesus must live, grow, learn, and experience life as we do. He grieves with the Widow at Nain, over the death of her son. He weeps with the sisters, Mary and Martha, in Bethany, at the death of their brother, Lazarus. Jesus enters into the pain and loss of everyone he encounters who watch as he opens the doors of hearts and enters. Finally Jesus, himself, enters death at the hands of yet another powerful tyrant trying to preserve the status quo. It is this death that makes all of the difference.

It is different because Jesus could not be contained by death. Just like Herod could not stop Jesus from becoming Messiah and Pilate could not stop Jesus from establishing a "kingdom" far greater than Rome so God's love could not be held by the power of death. The weapons of the powerful are stripped of their effect. Death is no longer final. It doesn't get the last word. True, the pain still exists and grieving is still very much real. But then God's experience is also very real. Jesus doesn't survive this massacre to escape the pain. Jesus survives to give hope to the hopeless. We are released from our captivity to sin. We are no longer slaves to the selfish use of power, or to the senseless victimization of the powerless. We are free to be human with one another; to join God in weeping with the poor and dispossessed, as well as rejoicing in the restoration of all humanity. God is ending the cycle of violence and the necessity of our participation in the cycle. Jesus doesn't die as a baby, but enters death willingly as an adult. When he was a baby many died in a frenzy where only his life was saved. As an adult, only he died in an act of sacrifice where many were saved.

That's the story of Christmas, my brothers and sisters. It's a messy story that will eventually have a happy ending but one that will not come until after much pain and suffering. But it is also a story of mercy and love that, messy as it may be, is intended to bring life beyond all the measurements of this world. Let's celebrate Christmas. Amen.