

Christmas Interrupted

Christmas 2C {1681} St. Barnabas Episcopal Church

January 3, 2010 Florissant, Missouri

TEXT: Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23

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This time the dream was urgent and frightening. The angel told Joseph. "Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." And so our Merry Christmas, with Joseph and Mary, the manger, the angels, and the shepherds, is interrupted by a story of impending violence, a hasty departure under the cover of night, and a flight into a foreign country to escape the terror that King Herod perpetrated on the little boys of Bethlehem. Our joy over the birth of Jesus is overcome with dread as we hear this story, because we know that this is only the beginning of what our world will do to Jesus. According to John's gospel, Jesus escaped a mob lynching when he attended the Feast of Booths in Jerusalem. According to Luke's gospel, the people of his own hometown threatened to throw him off a cliff. According to Mark's gospel, he was accused of being in league with the devil. According to Matthew's gospel, Pharisees tried again and again to trap Jesus in scandal so he would lose credibility if not his life. And finally, according to all four gospels, the Roman and Jewish elites crucified him.

These days we are wishing "Happy New Year" to every one we meet. We are doing that basking in the pleasant memories of celebrating Jesus' birthday at church on Christmas Eve, the gift giving and getting on Christmas day, and the warm fellowship of family and friends during this season. For a while we have insulated ourselves from bad news. But today the Bible story assigned for this Sunday jolts us back to the reality that evil always lurks in our world and that it will never give us much time to revel in joy. We are reminded that our hope for peace, justice, or happiness at this time of year is just wishful thinking. More than once in the year to come we will hear news of violence. More than once in the year to come we will hear news of oppression or exclusion. More than once in the year to come we will hear news of a tragic death, a life threatening illness, a lost job, or a financial disaster afflicting some one we care about. Happy New Year, indeed.

What I have conveniently overlooked to this point in this sermon is that God sent an angel to Joseph to warn him of Herod's terrorist plot. The good news is that God helped Joseph discern the immanence of evil and showed him a way to escape it. But the escape route God showed them was not pleasant. They had to leave their home and most of their belongings in Bethlehem. (According to Matthew, Mary and Joseph lived in Bethlehem, not Nazareth). As they traveled, they had to live in fear that Herod's soldiers would discover them and kill their baby. They had to negotiate all the hardships and pitfalls of travel on foot across a troublesome terrain to get to Egypt. And then they had to make a new life for themselves while they lived in exile among people who regarded them as immigrant foreigners.

In other words, sometimes the good news turns out not to be so good when all is said and done. As one who has lived through surgery and six weeks of radiation treatments to get rid of cancer in my body, I sometimes thought the cure was worse than the disease. The good news was that I could kick cancer by doing this. The not so good news was that I would feel terrible for most of the time I was engaged in battle with the disease. Neither of the choices God gave me were pleasing

Every one of us will have to choose between bad and not so good. Bad news will inevitably interrupt the happy times we enjoy. Almost always, the response that we must make will add difficulties to our lives that we did not foresee and do not welcome. It is never easy or pleasant to accept the hardships we must endure when we respond to the bad news the way God calls us to respond. We can only trust that God will help us endure what we must endure when we must live out the "not so good news."

The good news that brings us joy at Christmas is not that Jesus came to take away all the bad things or to shield us from all the bad things in the world. The good news in today's gospel is that God will show us a way to respond to bad news, and give us the strength and fortitude to endure the difficulties that response requires.

Wishing everybody a "Happy New Year" is just wishful thinking if all we are wishing is happy times. Inevitably there are going to be unhappy days, if not weeks and months, in the New Year. Instead of simple wishful thinking, let us proclaim the Good News that we can trust Jesus to help us discern how to respond to bad news when we encounter it, and that he can give us the resolve and courage to live through the tough times those responses call for. That is one way we can participate in God's mission in the coming year that will give us lasting *joy* rather than temporary happiness.

So let me be the first to wish you a *Joyful* New Year!

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