

"Heartburn."

Isaiah 63:7-9; Ps. 148; Matthew 2: 13-23

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Chapel Lane Presbyterian Church

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There probably ought to be some kind of warning notice on this morning's bulletin:

WARNING: MAY CONTAIN SCENES OF VIOLENCE NOT
SUITABLE FOR CHILDREN.
PARENTAL DISCRETION ADVISED.

The story I read is one we might want to eliminate from our Christmas storybook.

We've only just finished our annual trek to Bethlehem to hear the great Good News of the Angels. We have run to the manger along with the shepherds. We've knelt down in adoration of the Christ Child. We have watched the Magi open their gifts and we've done a fair amount of gift giving and receiving ourselves.

It's been a wonderful celebration of the Word made Flesh, the God who comes among us and lives with us.

In our newspapers and newscasts we've witnessed a great outpouring of love and concern, of giving and caring, and neighborliness. And we've tried not to dwell on the stories of loss and violence and tragedy.

But, now, as the holiday Muzak recedes we hear the cries of mothers weeping for their lost children and know that Matthew's sudden shift from the Magi to mayhem is not far off the mark.

Matthew's Christmas pageant doesn't end with tinsel-covered angels proclaiming Messiah's birth, but with Rachel weeping for her children and a Holy Family on the run. This is Christmas in Bethlehem, in the real Bethlehem of then and now.

We may sing "O Little Town of Bethlehem how still we see thee lie", but the reality is the arrival of Jesus makes that town just one more place in which a desperate leader - call him Herod or Hitler or any other thug throughout history - did not mind a little murder in order to advance great political ideals or keep a population under control.

Call these places Darfur or Baghdad or Pakistan... The Bible calls such places Bethlehem.

At the end of the Christmas story we are jolted back to reality and before we leave Bethlehem, bound for safer places, we look back over our shoulders and see swords.

This may not be the part of Christmas story we want to hear, but it may be the part of the Christmas story we need to hear, because any God who is unwilling to come to the "Bethlehems" of our world won't do us much good. Any God who will save us will have to save us right where we are, right in the middle of the mess. A saving God will have to come and get us, because we simply cannot get to God.

And now it's as though the God who has given us the rich feast of Christmas now is giving us some "heart burn" to go along with it. It is the heart burn caused every time we pick up the newspaper or log on to a website showing us the latest news of tragedy befalling young families or communities across the globe.

There are always innocents caught in the crossfire, whether it is Jewish 2 yr. olds in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago, or Palestinian 2 yr. olds in the Bethlehem of today. It may be toddlers on the streets of one of the world's cities, or children murdered by relatives on Christmas Eve.

The theologian Karl Barth wrote: "The ultimate security of a noble faith lies in the assurance that 'all things work together for good,' but not that all things are of themselves good, or that the faithful will escape vicissitudes which are of themselves evil rather than good. Those who love God understand that the meaning of life lies rooted in a power too great and good to be overcome by the momentary anarchies of history or by the periodic suggestions of chaos and meaninglessness."

(p.97 Beyond Tragedy)

The light that came into the world at Christmas is a light that shines in the darkness. The greater the light, the sharper the shadows become. The light of Christmas is a light too great for the darkness to overcome. Nevertheless the darkness is there.

The announcement of "Peace on Earth" and "Glad Tidings of Great Joy" evokes a response in all who hear it. It mobilizes shepherds and soldiers with equal regularity.

Shepherds hear the news and run to the manger. Magi see the star and use its light to guide their way to worship the Christ. Herod hears the news and calls out the death squad.

The Herods of the world are one reason why the Good News that begins in a manger leads to a cross.

But, in spite of the Herods, the Good News refuses to be killed off. It will not be sealed up in a tomb. It is the light that shines in the darkness, never to be comprehended or commanded by the darkness. It just rolls the stone away and keeps on rolling through history, announcing freedom from fear and the end of sorrow.

And even Rachel is finally able to stop weeping because in Christ God has wiped every tear from every eye. God is able to wipe the tears from our eyes too and fill us with joy that isn't based on sentimentality or seasonal celebrations.

This Christmas will fade as it always does, but the Good News will remain as it always has. And God still invites our daily, faith-filled response to the Good News of Christmas - to be bearers of light in the darkness, to be people of faith in the midst of difficulty and doubt, and to have a solid, realistic awareness of the world that God has made and redeemed in Christ.

It is a world of danger, but it is also a world filled with daily opportunities for us to respond to the Good News with acts of kindness, justice and mercy toward all of God's children.

We mustn't let the presence of "Herod" cause us to speculate on the absence of God. Immanuel, God with Us, has come into the world and nothing, not even Herod, can keep him from his purpose to heal and to save.

The heart burn we feel is caused in part by God's Spirit asking what are we doing to counteract the darkness, what are we doing to end the crying of Rachel and the slaughter of innocents.

Our hearts will give us away and will tell us that things are not as they ought to be and the presence of the Christ child in our midst will tell us that God is still at work, still moving us toward that day of consummation when all our hearts will be at peace and all our spirits will be joined together in God.

And until that day, our heart burn tells us there is work to do as disciples of Christ. And so we give thanks to God for the feast of Christmas and we also thank God that our hearts burn within us and point us in the direction of service and sacrifice and seeking to be those who can quiet Rachel's tears and protect all of God's precious children.

May it be so for us, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

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