

**In the Wake of Christmas**  
**Matthew 2:13-23**

In today's gospel reading  
the message of the angels has turned from peace and goodwill  
to warnings of terror soon to be unleashed by a violent madman.  
The holy family is on "high alert"  
They are now on the run, doing all they can  
to protect the royal infant from a brutal attempt on his life.  
Christmas has come like a storm upon the political scene of Jerusalem,  
as a threat to anyone in power,  
So Herod, who believes himself to be the real king of the Jews,  
lashes out in rage against this newborn child,  
this little one who is a threat to his sovereignty,  
and orders the cold-blooded slaughter of the children of Bethlehem.  
Joseph, Mary, and Jesus become refugees, unable to return to their homeland,  
At the direction of the angels, they flee first to the land of Egypt,  
then back again, finally settling down into a town called Nazareth.

If ever we are tempted to become overly sentimental and romantic  
about the Christmas story,  
today's gospel reading will shock us back to reality.  
It is offensive, almost too much to bear so soon after Christmas,  
But here it is, right here in the gospel of Matthew,  
the very next thing after the departure of the wise men.  
And we who dearly love this little family, this little child we've just adored,  
are caught up in this storm.  
We are drawn right into the wake of Christmas.

Part of the offense of this story is due to our own  
glossing over of the Christmas story.  
We have wrapped the birth of Christ in layers of sentimentality and romance,  
preferring to think only of cute babies and glittery angels;  
and forgetting that God-with-us means  
God immersed into the all the brokenness, and darkness,  
and violence, political turmoil, and ugly sinfulness  
of life in our world.

In a way, this dark turn in the Bethlehem story  
makes the story easier for us to relate to.  
Here, just as in our lives, we are quickly confronted with suffering,  
right on the heels of Christmas.  
We are reminded of the specter of death lurking, waiting for us;  
we are faced with questions about an uncertain future;  
we are unclear as to just how God's purposes will be worked out.  
Here, we are confronted with all the haunting questions  
we tried to forget in order to celebrate Christmas.  
But they were still there all along.  
No sooner have we thrown out the wrapping paper

and packed the leftovers in the fridge,  
but we are startled awake by an obituary for an old friend,  
hunted down by another menacing cancer diagnosis,  
under attack by the December credit card bill,  
assaulted with more bad news of war and terror.  
punched in the gut by the pain of family life.

And we take flight,  
thinking now that that chilly stable wasn't such a bad place after all.

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The gospel of Matthew tells us the truth, as startling as it may be to hear it.  
For even as he gazes back at the holy birth of the Messiah,  
he keeps us looking forward to the purpose of this child's coming.

Someone asked me, back before Christmas,  
why we have a crown of thorns and a cross  
on our purple paraments during Advent –  
it seems out of place.

Part of the reason is that we also use those purple paraments during Lent  
as we walk through the days toward Jesus' suffering and death.  
But also, it is quite right for us, during Advent and Christmas,  
to anticipate the crown of thorns and the cross,  
for these things will become the signs by which we recognize  
the Messiah.

And if we look closely at this story of  
(1) angelic warnings, (2) merciless slaughter, and (3) narrow escape,  
we will find woven into it a cruciform pattern, the shape of the cross,  
which reflects the work of God.

We see here a three-fold movement which mirrors the story  
of God's salvation of the world in Jesus Christ.

(1) The first movement is God's Action,  
the Holy Initiative, the Beginning of the Salvation of the World,  
in the sending of the Messiah.

The Royal Son of God is born as a human being,  
come to earth to establish the kingdom of God.

This child comes to show us...

...that God's love will prevail over all the wrong that plagues the planet.

...that God has forgiven us,

erased the black smudge on the story of our lives  
and given us a fresh, clean sheet of paper to start over.

...that whatever we fear most about the future,

whatever may hover over us, as bad as it may be,

it can never separate us from the God who works good for us.

This is the first movement of the story of the gospel,  
the Good News of Christmas: God is beginning a new thing,

and it begins with this child Jesus.

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(2) But now comes the bad news, the second movement of the story:  
the world does not recognize God's new beginning.  
If the world hears it, it does not believe it.  
If the world believes it, it feels threatened by it.  
And so here comes King Herod, the most compulsive of unbelievers,  
who acts out his insecurity about this little child  
who threatens every earthly throne...  
*he was infuriated*  
*and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem*  
*who were two years old or under...*

It was just as the gospel of John would later record  
*He was in the world...yet the world did not know him.*  
*He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.*

Here in Matthew's story, right at the very beginning,  
we have a foreshadowing of the end.  
This time, Jesus is saved from Herod's sword, while the other innocents die.  
But this is only a temporary reprieve.  
A time is coming in which the powers of this world  
will seem to prevail over the Prince of Peace;  
a time in which the fearful, threatened world lashes out  
against the love of God, not knowing what it does;  
a time in which no angelic messengers come to the rescue.  
a time in which the Innocent One is slaughtered  
for the sake of the guilty.  
Jesus may be saved from Herod's sword this time,  
but only so that he may begin his journey to the cross.

And so it is with us.  
The good news of Christmas notwithstanding, we suffer pain.  
We get caught up in sinful ways that diminish our lives.  
Death looms over us, and we do all we can to escape it.  
This is the second movement of the story:  
The Messiah will be rejected.  
He must die on the cross, and we must die with him.

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(3) But remember – always remember –  
in the midst of your pain, do not forget:  
there are three movements to this story.  
God acts to save the world.  
The world rejects God by rejecting the One God sends.  
But God's purpose will not be thwarted. God's love will prevail.

And Matthew goes to great lengths to assure us of that...  
Listen...

*the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph...  
“Get up, take the child and his mother and flee to Egypt...”  
...then Joseph got up...and went...  
...to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord.*

And again...

*an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared to Joseph in Egypt, and said  
“Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel...”  
...then Joseph got up...and went...  
...so that what had been spoken through the prophet might be fulfilled.*

And even in the horrible slaughter of the innocents,

*...then was fulfilled what had been spoken by the prophets.*

This is not noble living. Nothing glorious here.

It is a desperate family reacting to the powers that press in on them.

They are moving under compulsion,  
living in constant uncertainty and transition.  
They are strung out, bedraggled, beset by circumstance.  
(Do you ever feel this way?)

Yet even in this darkest of hours, in this most tenuous, uncertain situation,  
the purposes of God are at work.

Just like in the story of that other Joseph, in the Old Testament,  
who narrowly escaped death at the hands of his brothers.

That Joseph also escaped by going to Egypt,  
and later became the One who would save his family from certain death  
when a famine struck the land,  
And Joseph's family grew while in Egypt, and became a great nation.  
But Egypt became a place of oppression and slavery,  
until the time of Moses  
when God's purposes were carried out  
and the people of Israel were delivered out of bondage  
and into the freedom of the promised land.

From Israel to Egypt and back again. We've heard this story before –  
it is the ongoing story of God's saving purposes being worked out.

There will always be the third movement of the gospel story,  
and we are like children saying to our parents,  
“tell us again the part where...”

The part where God steps in and makes right what is wrong.  
The part where God's Word is vindicated.  
The part where God is victorious over every dark power that pretends  
to have the final authority, even the power of death.  
This is the part of the story we hear another time,  
where two women, both named Mary,  
go to Jesus tomb on the third day...  
...they are looking for his dead body,

but instead of finding a dead Jesus,  
they run into another angel who tells them even more  
unbelievable news,  
the Messiah has escaped death again,  
and this time by going through it.

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We who celebrate the birth of Christ,  
must also be drawn into the wake of Christmas.  
There is no other way.

Well, there is another way...  
We *could* celebrate Christmas without remembering the cross...  
but then all we've got when it's over is  
an old Christmas tree thrown out by the street,  
with dead needles and tinsel washing down the gutter.  
and we've still got the shopping mall.  
We've always got the mall to make us feel better.

But, if we let the *whole story* of Jesus define who we are,  
then no matter what darkness covers us,  
no matter what uncertainty we face,  
we know that God's purpose cannot be thwarted.  
because God has begun a plan for on Christmas day,  
and nothing can stand in the way.

For the light of the world has come in Jesus.  
Christ, the Savior is born.

Amen.