

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
First Sunday after Christmas
December 30, 2007

Strange Providence

Matthew 2:13-23; Isaiah 63:7-9

One of my favorite little Christmas books is by British author Peter Spier. Simply called *Christmas!*, the book is about one family's Christmas, from beginning to end.

It is a picture book – no words –

but a book that speaks volumes if you really study the pictures.

Each frame is like one of these Eye Spy books,

the more you look, the more you keep seeing new things.

The first few pages are filled with shopping and decorating,

children lined up to get their pictures made with Santa,

bringing in stacks of Christmas cards from the mailbox,

children playing in the snow,

Christmas carolers going from house to house on a snowy night,

and the whole Christmas tree adventure,

from tree lot to putting the star on the top.

Peter Spier goes for realism throughout.

There are three young children in the family,

and the mother never gets a moments rest

as she goes from one preparation to the next.

One frame at the end of the big Christmas grocery trip,

shows her loading heavy grocery bags into the trunk of the car,

with the children trying to be helpful, but mostly getting in the way.

And you notice a little mitten lying on the pavement.

The next frame is an empty parking space;

empty except for the same mitten, still lying on the pavement.

There are a couple of full page spreads of Christmas Eve:

One of the church filled, with extra chairs set up for overflow.

And then a Holy Night picture, of all the houses and the church,

covered in a blanket of snow, all lights out,

and a single bright star shining in the crisp, winter sky.

But the book doesn't stop with Christmas morning.

After the packages are opened and Christmas dinner is served,

the pictures keep going.

One is of the kitchen, piled with half emptied serving dishes,

cloth napkins and wet drying towels every where,

and a mountain of plates and bowls overflowing in the sink.

Then, the Christmas tree being undecorated,
ornaments put away in boxes that lay all around the living room.
The mother vacuuming a carpet covered in needles.
The cat reaching under the sofa to play with a forgotten glass ball.
Then, outside at the curb in a steady gray rain,
lies the Christmas tree
with piles of boxes and scraps of Christmas wrapping
The snow on the ground is turning into a dull slush.
People standing in long lines at the return counters.
And the Christmas tree lot with a few pitiful trees and wreaths
fallen over and blowing in the rain and wind.ⁱ

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We experience it every year: Christmas is over – now it's back to reality!
Even with New Year's Eve and Day in there to break the fall,
it can be a hard transition.
Driving to work, or getting the kids ready for school,
or running all the usual, old, monotonous errands,
we may feel a let down, a feeling that nothing really has changed.
Whatever moments of wonder we experience,
however many angels sang of "Peace on earth and goodwill to all"
are easily silenced by the return of the mundane.

But it's not just the mundane –
it's the return of money troubles, workplace politics,
worrisome visits to the doctor, bombings in Iraq,
and, this year, Pakistan.

What are we to do now with this quaint little story of a stable and a star,
of shepherds, a donkey, and Magi gifts?
Some would say,
Once a year is all very well,
but you can't live with the Christmas Spirit forever.ⁱⁱ

Well, it may help our transition back to reality
to remember that the experience of Jesus' birth in a stable,
wrapping him in swaddling clothes and laying him in a manger,
couldn't have felt very quaint or peaceful
to Joseph and Mary.

And if there was a brief time of peace, after the child was born,
according the Gospel of Matthew, it didn't last for long.
Very early in Jesus' life,
the politics of fear impinged on the holy family,

and shoved them into the dangerous life of refugees.
King Herod, wracked with jealous anxiety
over this child who was prophesied to be King,
sends out his army to slaughter every male child
under the age of two.

So begins the next step of this lonely and arduous journey
for Joseph, Mary, and Jesus.
A messenger in a dream warns Joseph to flee Herod's jealous rage
by taking his child and his wife to Egypt.

Anyone familiar with the books of Genesis
(and those who took Bible Basics certainly are now)
will be reminded of an earlier story of a Joseph
who sojourned to Egypt.
Once again, as with the earlier Joseph,
Egypt becomes a place of refuge and protection
for Joseph's family.

But as the outcome of that first sojourn
was the enslavement of Joseph's family,
and God called the people out of Egypt,
so here too,
Joseph's family is called by God out of Egypt again.
Matthew says this is to fulfill the scripture, in which God says,
Out of Egypt I have called my Son.

After the death of Herod,
the Holy Family returns to the land of Israel,
and they settle into Nazareth.
Again we have a strange parallel
with the descendants of the earlier Joseph,
who were called and led by Moses into the promised land.
And Matthew says the choice of Nazareth,
while it was immediately due to Joseph's fear
of Herod's son Archelaus who was ruling over Judea,
was ultimately made so that the scriptures would be fulfilled
that *He will be called a Nazarean.*

Matthew's point here:
even given the violent and deadly circumstances,
these difficult journeys of Joseph and Mary and Jesus,
hither and yon and back again,
are all a part of God's strange providence
not just for them, but for the whole world.

The difficulties of this one family,
and their faithfulness in the mist of their difficulties,
will become the source of salvation and strength
for the rest of humankind.
God's work of salvation is not thwarted by evil, by violence,
by the politics of fear, or the suffering of the innocent.
None of these things are God's will,
but in opposing God's will
they cannot prevent God's plan from being fulfilled.

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But there is another thing we learn from the sojourns of the Holy Family.
The Almighty God of Heaven and Earth,
the Creator and Sustainer of All Worlds,
the Savior of Every Living Thing,
chooses to work through the weakness of the creation,
and the fumbling works of human beings,
to accomplish the salvation of the world.

Isaiah recounts God's salvation in days of old,
*It was no messenger or angel but his presence
that saved them;
in his love and in his pity he redeemed them;
he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.*

But in this story, God's saving work
happens in a strange and surprising way.
Joseph and Mary are called upon to lift up and *carry the Savior*,
to keep him safe from destruction,
so he can accomplish his appointed work.
Four times we hear the phrase "take the child" or "took the child".

The moment of holy wonder at the birth of the Savior
is quickly transformed into a life of holy responsibility.
It is by Joseph and Mary's faithful action
that God's work is done on earth.

We might say that for the Holy Family
Christmas is over, now it's back to reality.
Or we might better say,
Apart from human reality, Christmas has no meaning.
Human reality is what Christmas is all about.
The Incarnation is the coming of God into our reality.

The Holy Wonder of Christmas lives on in the operating room or the ICU.

The Prince of Peace is no less present in the deserts Iraq and Afghanistan.

The voice of God can be heard in the hallways and classrooms
of our schools,
even though a confused idea of tolerance
doesn't allow us to speak of God in our schools.

In the cutthroat worlds of business and politics,
the Wonderful Counselor is present and powerful
in the lives of his servants who are his representatives there.

The Christmas Spirit who is present
in the soft glow of the candlelight carol on Christmas Eve
is no less present in the stream of red taillights ahead of you
as you sit in traffic that first day back to work.

The gift of God we receive in the silent wonder of Christmas night
is now the gift we carry with us
into the Egypts and the Nazareths
the places of danger and power and struggle,
of our present reality.

The season of Christmas is winding down,
but our life as the Christmas people has been given a fresh start .
You may look at your life and think it a strange way for God to work,
but God's ways are often strange in our reckoning.

So, get up from where you are.
Take up the child of Christmas.
And go where God is leading you.

Do what God puts before you to do.
and Christmas will live on
by your faithfulness of your life.

ⁱ Peter Spier, *Christmas!* (London: Dell Yearling, 1983).

ⁱⁱ John A. T. Robinson, *But That I Can't Believe* (London: Fontana, 1967), p. 37