



Nancy Haynes  
Trinitarian Congregational Church

January 1, 2017

Scripture: Matthew 2: 13-23 – The Escape to Egypt, Massacre and Return

Sermon Title: Resolutions

Joy and blessings was what I was anticipating from the lectionary text for this first Sunday after Christmas and the first day of the New Year. We encounter something very different. This scripture is dark as it speaks to fleeing home in the night, trickery, and the killing of all children under two. It is jolting to hear this passage when the Christmas spirit, joy, and goodwill to all lingers. The scripture contains the right setting and appropriate characters: the baby Jesus, angels, Joseph and Mary. Yet, it quickly turns ugly and frightening. On the surface this speaks to a terrifying event and prompts the question what is going on?

As we dig into the message what is revealed is that even in the ugliness of the occasion, especially in the darkens of uncertain and broken times, God provides protection. As in this event 2,000 years ago, in all uncertain times since, and in current uncertain times the one thing upon which we can depend is God's providential care.

Joseph represents the one who trusts in God's care even when doing so may not make any sense and in so doing scripture is fulfilled. Joseph pays attention to God's leading through dreams sounds very much like his ancestor Joseph long ago; the flight of Jesus and his family to Egypt looking for safety from a threat sounds like the sojourn of the people of Israel, in need of food in a famine; Jesus, like Moses, is saved as a baby from a brutal tyrant and comes up out of Egypt to respond to God's call; Bethlehem is the City of David, Rachel weeps over her lost children in exile, like the lost children of the massacre.



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Herod represents the dark side of the gospel. His ruthless violence in the face of a threat is exactly the opposite of Joseph's response to danger. The reign of Herod reminds us that Jesus didn't enter a world of peace and harmony among people. Jesus was born into a violent broken world that was suffering. Appointed by the Romans Herod had to fight several years to take control of his kingdom so he never felt secure in his role. He killed his rivals and when he suspected intrigue in his own family he kills his wife and one of his sons. It was a time of great fear, hate, violence and societal breakdown.

There is certainly nothing sentimental about this Christmas story from Matthew. For it is grounded in the historical events, the history of Israel and the fulfilment of scripture. Matthew designates Jesus as the Son of God who will deliver Israel through the exodus to new beginnings. The story reflects the turbulence, despair and terror of the time. Tyrants kill children and families flee in the middle of the night. The text also conveys that Jesus came to save, heal and love. Jesus' life was not neat and pristine. Rather, Jesus lived his life in the midst of all the complicated mess around him.

The difficult question lingering is why did God have to kill these babies just to make the Scriptures come true? This would be a mis-reading, or mis-hearing, of the text. Matthew is careful in his wording, saying **not** that "All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet," but "**Then** was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet."



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According to Thomas Long, Professor of Preaching at Emory University Candler School of Theology, this matters, because Matthew certainly doesn't call these murders God's will; rather, he tells this story to reassure us that nothing, not even the most despicable evil we can imagine, the murder of innocent babies, can stop God from accomplishing God's purposes. And that purpose was the birth of God in the manger. It is God come among us. It is a provident God who guides a devout and dreaming father with instructions to flee their home so the child can grow to become the savior of his people and of generations to come.

This Gospel story matters because it tells us the truth: the sometimes-difficult truth of unjust rulers and violence and private grief and personal pain and all the despair of life. But also, the always hopeful truth that God has not stood back at a distance, but in Jesus has joined God's own self to our story and is working -- even now, even here -- to grant us new life that we may not just endure but flourish, experiencing resurrection joy and courage in our daily lives and resolving to respond to others with compassion and peace.

I know many are glad to see the end of 2016 which brought us despair in the international arena with the ongoing crisis in the Middle East, terrorist attacks in France, Germany and other countries and bitter political rhetoric. Nationally we bore witness to an election cycle that did not bring out the best in us and revealed deep divisions in our country, communities and families. We witnessed too many acts of violence in our cities and towns and heard the voice of many who have felt left behind and unseen. In our own families, we have lost love ones, dealt with illness and financial insecurity. Even as we are glad to see the back of 2016 I also suspect that there



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maybe a few here that, as we enter a new year, are feeling fearful, uncertain and spiritually challenged.

After all, as the year commences we are facing bitter political divisions in the U.S. and around the world, rising racism, terrorism, the scapegoating of minorities, of environmental degradation, and of wars and genocide, it's easy to wonder where the light is. There are utterances of where is God?

The good news is that God is in the manger. The birth of Christ celebrates the triumph of light over darkness of love over hate: God's entering the world in Jesus, and the light of Christ overcoming the darkness in the world – is as applicable today as in the time of Herod. It is difficult to remember, in times of uncertainty, that the night is darkest just before the dawn, that we must not lose hope but that we must trust the God who has the power to deliver from even the darkest night.

Great spiritual teachers throughout the millennia have taught that any journey consists of ups and downs, and that sojourners can experience a personal dark night of the soul. If the faithful persevere, they will discover that the personal dark night, like the historical darkness is darkest just before the dawn, and the breakthrough to the other side is worth the walk through the darkness. In our institutions, societies and political process, as in our personal lives, the deepest darkness comes just before the dawn. If an institution or society perseveres, it can experience the great power and light that come with breaking through to the dawn.



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One guide for me in this time of darkness is St. John of the Cross. He describes the personal dark night as a time of necessary self-emptying, not of our choosing. We fill ourselves with knowledge and accomplishments and allow these to define us. Yet growth involves emptying ourselves of this outer fulfillment. Sister Constance Fitzgerald summarizes St. John's understanding of the process of emptying: Only when one becomes aware of the illusory and limiting character of this fullness in the face of the brokenness, in the realization of the limitations of our life and relationships, and in the shattering of our dreams and meanings, can the depths of hunger and thirst that exist in us really be experienced. St. John claims that this deep hunger and thirst, the infinite capacity for love, cannot be fulfilled by our human loves and accomplishments, but only by the transcendent Christ. Sister Fitzgerald extends St. John's work to the society level. In this time of societal impasse, when it seems that our human attempts to figure out solutions to our overwhelming problems only run us into brick walls and tempt us to cynicism and despair, St. John, Sister Fitzgerald claims, offers a way forward. Fitzgerald believes that the insoluble crises we face are signs of transition in societies development and in the evolution of humanity. These crises provide an invitation for us as a society to empty ourselves of rationally constructed answers that no longer work. The crises invite us to humble ourselves and seek deeper wisdom, wisdom that emerges from letting go, from our collective intuition, and to turn to love, hope and prayer. Fitzgerald challenges us to bring our societal impasse to prayer. It is only through letting go and seeking God's perspective and God's way forward, she claims, that society will be freed, healed, and brought to a new vision. Only in this way can we be set free from selfless action.



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“Death is involved here – a dying in order to see how to be and to act on behalf of God in the world.” Dying leads to new life and new beginnings. Out of the darkness comes light.

On the cusp of a New Year let us respond to the invitation to let go of our egos and preconceived notions, and seek the deeper wisdom that emerges when we become empty. And may our society humble itself, recognizing the limits of human understanding and effort, and seek a way forward guided by the God that was found in the manger.

We can resolve, just as Matthew did, to see things as they are and still affirm that God is working, even in the worst that we humans can do. Just as God, in the time of Herod, protected the baby Jesus from the threat of death, so will God provide protection in our time of brokenness, violence and unprecedented social and political uncertainty. Faithfulness and trust in God will yield protective care. God will protect us in uncertain times.

Lastly, our part is to realize that our intentions, words and actions matter. We each have a choice in how we respond to uncertainty and fear of the unknown. Let us respond as a Joseph, not as a Herod. Bob Brown, in the January newsletter Pastoral perspective, lists resolutions and actions we can chose. These are reprinted on the back of the bulletin, so you can reflect on them and perhaps make them part of your 2017 resolutions. In embracing love over hate, seeking to build rather than destroy, to heal rather than wound and to pray rather than despair, we can declare the real joy of Christmas this year; that nothing can defeat God’s promise, and that God



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is with us. Even when we cannot celebrate peace on earth we can celebrate the love of God and the promise of peace.

AMEN