

Put Your Hand Into The Hand of God

(Exodus 1:13-2:8; Romans 8:31-35, 37-39; Matthew 2:13-22)

The Christmas pageant had just ended. It had been everything that the pastor had hoped it would be—beautiful; inspirational; reverent; joyful. Everyone in the sanctuary was feeling full of 'the Christmas spirit.' The pastor was just giving the closing prayer when she felt a little hand tapping her on the leg. It was seven-year-old Lily, who had just played the part of King Herod in the Christmas pageant. Lily obviously wanted to say something. So, thinking how cute it would probably be, the pastor handed the microphone to Lily. But Lily did not say something cute to the congregation. Instead, looking ominously at the congregation, Lily loudly and clearly announced, 'I am King Herod, and I have been watching you. I am going to kill all your babies.' The festive mood of the congregation changed immediately, replaced by an uncomfortable feeling, part confusion, part fear. Even though it was a message no one wanted to hear, especially right then, the child had actually given everyone an important scriptural message.¹

Last week, we were celebrating the birth of a baby. We remembered how wise men from the East showed up to pay homage to the Baby Jesus. They brought him their best gifts. But in our scripture for today, right after the Gospel Writer Matthew tells us of the warm and fuzzy visit of the wise men, he gives us this shockingly horrible story of King Herod massacring all the innocent babies in Bethlehem! No wonder, for years, this passage, verses 16-18, in the lectionary for right after Christmas, was intentionally left out.²

There's one episode of "Mash" that comes to mind. Remember "Mash?" It was a TV show about a group of Army medics during the Korean War. In this one episode, the battalion was all ready to celebrate Christmas when a new patient was brought in. The soldier was severely wounded. The doctors tried to save the man's life, but they were unsuccessful. Although it went against all of his medical ethics, one doctor wrote down an incorrect time of death. He wrote down on the medical record that the soldier died on

¹ Duncan, King, "A Word of Hope For a Hard World"

² Andrews, Susan R., "The Rest of The Story"

December 26 instead of December 25. And he justified this deception by saying, "No child should have to connect Christmas to death."³

But the Gospel Writer Matthew did connect Christmas to death. The little girl who played Herod knew it. And so do we. Even though we'd like to ignore the story, it's there, in black and white, in our Bibles.

When the wise men were following the star, they stopped and asked the local king, King Herod, if he knew anything about a new king who had just been born. King Herod told the wise men to stop back by after finding the child so that he too could worship the child.

But it was well known that King Herod was a suspicious and cruel man. He murdered his wife Mariamne, his mother-in-law Alexandra, his eldest son Antipater, two other sons, Alexander and Aristobulus. He also had killed 300 unnamed court officials, along with most of the members of the Jewish high court known as the Sanhedrin. And when he was on his death bed, he ordered that several prominent citizens be killed. He knew that he wouldn't be mourned, but he wanted to be sure that there was mourning at his death. There can be no doubt about Herod's intentions in wanting the men from the east to stop back by and divulge the name and whereabouts of the newborn rival to his power.

So they went home another way. Reading this, we smile and think, "Ah ha! King Herod couldn't fool God! God was too smart for Herod! God intervened and saved Jesus!" But while this is true, King Herod wasn't about to give up. The power of one for evil, the power of darkness, should never be underestimated. When we read on, we discover that when the men from the East didn't return to identify the newborn king, Herod simply ordered that all of the babies in Bethlehem should be killed.

Did Matthew include this story so that we would be in despair? Of course not. But I think that Matthew had a few very important reasons for including the slaughter of the innocents in his Christmas story.

³ Duncan, King, "A Word of Hope For a Hard World"

First, the story reminds us that even on this side of the birth of Jesus, there is still darkness, evil, suffering, heartbreak in our world and in our lives.

Second, the story reminds us of the slaughter of infants at Moses' birth and how God used the worst the world could do to bring salvation. The story thus prompts us to look for God to do the same in this story.

Third, the story makes it clear that on this side of Christmas, we are not alone in facing whatever comes our way. Emmanuel, which means "God with us," has come. He is as close to us as a heartbeat. As the Apostle Paul put it, "Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?...No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:31-39). In the past God was with certain people for certain times, but now, in some mysterious way we cannot completely comprehend, he is with each one of us all of the time—to comfort us; to enlighten us; to inspire us to persevere; to guide us; to bring some good out of the bad; to slowly unfold his plan for healing, wholeness, salvation for us and for all of creation; to empower us to work with him in his glorious plan.

And thus, finally, the story points out that we need to pay attention to the promptings we get from the God who is with us, promptings which will tell us how we can work with him in accomplishing his plan for good. Joseph paid attention to his dreams. Thus he knew when it was time to leave Bethlehem and flee to safety from Herod in Egypt. Similarly, Joseph knew when it was safe to return and where he and his family were to settle.

Our world is a mixture of light and dark, good and bad. Our lives are a mixture of good news and bad news, joy and sorrow, miraculous births and devastating heartaches, right? No one knew this better than a man named Frank Hinnant. Frank once had a beautiful baby boy. But his beautiful baby boy died when he was only 18 months old. After the boy's death, life was always painful to Frank. The dark had won. One December morning when Frank was on his way to work, he passed by a nativity scene in a store window. He tried to avoid the smiling faces of Mary and Joseph as they

gazed upon their infant son. Frank hurried on. Soon he came to an orphanage known as Holy Innocents. As he read the name, Frank started thinking. Holy Innocents. That was the name given to the babies who were murdered by King Herod. Then a new thought came to Frank's mind: the Christmas story doesn't end with the words "And they lived happily ever after." Frank suddenly understood that the Christmas story was a story of life, real life, life with its moments of peace and joy but also with its moments of lust for power and unjust social systems and unjust diseases in which the innocent suffer. Frank decided to go inside the orphanage, and the visit changed his life. He later told his wife of a dark place full of lonely, sad kids, desperate for someone to care. Frank sensed God with him, guiding him to do something to bring light into the darkness. He realized that he wasn't powerless. So he wrote a sizable check to the orphanage. The directors decided to add on a new wing and name it in honor of Frank's son. Frank's wife couldn't get over the change in Frank.⁴ Frank changed because he experienced God's presence, and he decided to not let the darkness have the last word. He did something to bring light into the orphanage, into the lives of hurting children, into his own life.

As we go into this new year, we do well to remember the story of the slaughter of the innocents. For most of us, the days will hold darkness as well as light, sorrows as well as joys. But let us know that God is with us, always ready to bring good out of the bad that comes our way. And so let us be sensitive to God's enlightenment and his guidance. And let us follow God's promptings.

Years ago, King George V sent this New Year's blessing to his British subjects:

I said to the man who stood at the Gate of the Year,
"Give me a light, that I might go safely out into the darkness."
And he replied, "Go out into the darkness
and put your hand into the hand of God.
That shall be more to you than a light and safer than a known way."⁵

So be it. Amen.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Remen, R., My Grandfather's Blessing, p. 105.

-- Terry Chamberlain Diehl; Hickman Mills Community Christian Church, January 4, 2009