

Christmas II—Year C  
Jeremiah 31:7-14  
Psalm 84  
Ephesians 1:3-6,15-19a  
Matthew 2:13-15,19-23

For all the beauty of the **nativity on Christmas Eve**; for all the **mysticism of the Word making its home in our flesh** and the **divine infusion of our humanity**; for all the **wonder of the star and the magi from the east**; for all of the **Christmas glow in our hearts**, *today's gospel* comes as a reminder that **this story is not all sweetness and light**, and certainly isn't **pie-in-the-sky-happily-ever-after**. *Today* it gets **really gritty**, and **thank God it does**.

**When the wise men got to Jerusalem, searching for the child whose star they had followed, asking around for this child who has been born king of the Jews, King Herod got wind of these inquiries, and he and all Jerusalem with him, were terrified, as those in power always are when their hold on power is threatened. Herod called the chief priest and scribes together and asked them where the Messiah was to be born, and they answered him, "In Bethlehem of Judea." Boy, there is nothing more dangerous than when religion is deployed in service of a purely political end.**

**Herod secretly calls for the wise men, learns the exact time when the star had appeared, and sent them on to Bethlehem to search diligently for the child and to send word back so that he might also go and pay him homage. Yeah right.**

**But the magi were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, and they left for the own country by another road.**

*Then comes today's passage.*

**After they left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him. Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt.**

Then the **lectionary tries to protect us by omitting the next three brutal verses**, but we *need to know this part of the story*.

**When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more." Never, ever underestimate the fury of a tyrant who feels threatened and betrayed.**

*Our passage* picks back up with **Herod's death when an angel of the Lord appears in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and says, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead. Joseph follows the angel's directive, but when he hears that Herod's son, Archelaus, was ruling over Judea, Joseph was afraid to go there. After being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee and made his home in a town called Nazareth.**

*There is sooooo much packed into this story.*

First, you've gotta love **Joseph's capacity to pay attention to his dreams**. He takes Mary as his wife because of *an angelic encounter in a dream*. He up and moves his family to Egypt in the middle of **the night because of a dream**. He comes back to Israel *because of a dream*. He doesn't go to Judea *because of a dream*.

*How many of us give that much credence to our dream life, and what are we missing when we push the stuff of our dreams aside? God has a myriad of ways to get to us, and sometimes, God needs to get around our waking defenses to have us hear what we really need to hear. Don't dismiss the messages that come when your eyes are closed.*

The **magi** also invite us to heed our dreams *and* to change direction completely based upon them. *Not only that*, but they were willing to risk displeasing the powers-that-be and head home by a completely different road.

*Are we willing to buck what is expected of us, even when those setting the expectations are powerful people, are we willing to buck that for the sake of some greater truth, trusting that this new path ahead of us will, indeed, lead us back home? The risk in aligning with powerful forces is that we lose touch with home altogether, lose touch with our deepest intuitive knowing, lose touch with that sacred divine guidance that is home and leads us home. The magi risk everything for the pearl of great price; do we?*

And the whole dynamic around Herod points to a really painful reality. *God coming into the world did not put an end to brutality and the desire for raw power. In fact, God coming into the world in complete in utter vulnerability is a direct threat to that power.*

Violence still exerts itself, innocents absolutely still die—*sometimes* we can protect the most vulnerable and get them to safety, and *sometimes*, all we can do is wail and lament with Rachel, who weeps for her children, refusing to be consoled because they are no more. You watch any mother who has lost a child, you watch *any mother who has lost a child at the hands of violence*, and you know the depth of that wail.

And whether we are called to be Joseph and protect the innocent *or* we are called to be Rachel and lament this tragic loss, *both are hard and holy paths*, and it's my guess that, over the course of our lives, *we will be called to do both of these hard labors*.

*And in this passage, there is the completely radical notion that is so easy to forget, but which we must remember. Jesus, and his parents, were refugees seeking asylum, seeking safety from a brutal and violent circumstance. Where would we be if Egypt had refused them entry? They didn't want to leave their home, but they had to flee in the night to preserve this vulnerable, sacred, and holy life—think of the newly arrived Afghan refugees fleeing the violence of the Taliban, think of the refugees fleeing the violence in Central America and Mexico—they are the Holy Family. We can have policy discussions about the best way to care for refugees, but as followers of Jesus, we have to remember that when we look in the face of a refugee, we are looking into the face of Christ. It's that simple, and no matter how complex or intractable these situations are, we don't get to look away or turn our back or the likes of Herod have won.*

*This week, I have not been able to get Archbishop Desmond Tutu out of my mind. He died last Sunday, and he knew all too well the evil of Apartheid in South Africa, he knew all too well the brutality of political leaders and oppressive systems that kill innocents, both with brutal force and by a thousand cuts to the soul.*

He, *at times*, protected the innocent; *at times*, wailed with those who refused to be consoled; *at times*, outmaneuvered the politically powerful; and had the most amazing capacity to disarm enemies with his smile, his humor, and his infectious laugh. There was no room in Archbishop Tutu for a theology that allowed the oppression of the children of God in this life promising them glory in the next life—*no, every human being has infinite worth and dignity and is deserving of a life where they can thrive as the children of God they are meant to be*. So, Archbishop Tutu walked with Joseph and Rachel and the magi; he knew the stuff of dreams and how to heed them, and *then he went one step more*.

You see, at this point in Matthew 2, Jesus isn't able to do much, but rather, he depends on those around him to carry him to safety. *But there will come a time when Jesus will abandon the path of safety and willingly journey to the cross, and there, he will reconcile all that can't be reconciled; there, he will break down the wall of hostility that divides us, create in himself one new humanity in place of two, as Ephesians 2 says; there, he will drain away the power of violence with a love that extends its arms to hold it all and declare that, in the end, love reigns. Sin and death may do their worst, but love and life will dance on Easter morning. Desmond Tutu knew all of this. And so, in time, he would lead the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. It was not enough to throw off oppression without healing the wounds of the oppressed and oppressor alike. And as hard and painful and demanding as all this work was, Archbishop Tutu never lost touch with joy.*

*Even in the darkest, most brutal, most violent of spaces, there is a joy that goes deeper still. I don't pretend to know how one finds such joy. I actually don't think you can will it; I think it comes as gift. But people like Desmond Tutu show us what it looks like.*

*So even as the tyrants still reign and still exert their power with brutal force, even while the innocents still suffer, even while we are called to follow Joseph and protect the vulnerable, even while we are called to join in Rachel in lament, even while we are called to thwart the desires of the powerful and risk charting a different course like the magi, we are also called to join Desmond as he followed Jesus in the work of justice and truth and reconciliation and joy.*

Thank God our forebears in the faith show us the way to live *fully* amidst the painful realities of the world in which we live, and thank God, *each of them, in their own way*, show us the way home. Amen.

The Rev. Cynthia K. R. Banks  
St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Boone, NC  
January 2, 2021