

It's hard to believe that it's just been a week since we celebrated the birth of Jesus. All of the anticipation of greeting the Christ Child on Christmas morning has come and gone. Maybe some of you have already packed up the lights and the decorations, including the nativity set, each piece being carefully wrapped and put into storage until next Christmas – Mary, Joseph and the baby in the manger; the animals and the shepherds, the angels and the wise men on camels. Maybe we should leave the wise men on display because we know from our scripture readings that the wise men, or the Magi did not arrive immediately after the birth of Jesus, certainly not visiting the child while sleeping in the manger. Their journey brought them to present their gifts to a toddler, possibly around two years of age. Life for the young child and his parents had probably been quite uneventful; Joseph was no-doubt working to provide for his family; Mary tending to the household and caring for her son. An ordinary, quiet life. But all of that was about to change.

When I looked at the lectionary readings for this first day of the new year, and knowing that I would be delivering the message, I had very mixed feelings. On one hand, I look at New Year's day as a day full of hope and promise for what is ahead but then I read this scripture. Thanks, Matthew for bringing us down from our holiday celebrations. But isn't that the way things always go? Christmas is supposed to be a time of joy, but sorrow and tragedy still find a way to creep in. Terrible things happen even at Christmas – just turn on the TV or pick up a newspaper. Unfortunately, whatever the Christmas season means to us, it doesn't mean we can switch off the bad news. The forces of evil do not lay down their arms for a cease fire just because the calendar says December 25th or even January 1st.

And so, the quiet, tranquil, ordinary life of Joseph, Mary and Jesus is about to get turned upside down. From a distant place, the Magi have started their journey in search of the one who had been born to be "king of the Jews". Without the help of GPS, the wise men sought help at the palace of Herod to find the one they were seeking. Herod's reaction was not unexpected. He could not accept that anyone

would be a rival to his position. Somehow, he managed to control his rage long enough to wish the traveler's luck. "All the best to you gentlemen" he probably said, and added, "when you find the king you're looking for can you let me know where he can be found because I also would like to deliver a special gift and worship him as well."

As we know, the Magi were warned in a dream that they should not go back to Herod, but instead, return to their country by another route. When Herod realized that they had tricked him, he was angry, and in his jealous rage he gave orders that all the boys in Bethlehem and vicinity that were two years old and under were to be killed. This would guarantee that the child born to be king would never grow up to take his throne. A tragedy was about to unfold but God would protect his Son. An angel appeared to Joseph in a dream. He was told of Herod's diabolic plan to kill the child and that they were to go to Egypt which was under Roman control and outside of Herod's jurisdiction. Here, the child would be safe and the family was to stay there until they received further instructions.

Herod's orders are carried out and young boys are murdered for no reason other than a man's jealous rage. That scene and the immeasurable grief which followed is more than we can even bear to imagine. This is not the message of hope and promise that we would like to hear on New Year's Day, or is it? The birth of Jesus has been heralded in Joseph's dream. This baby "will save his people from their sins" as Matthew records in chapter 1 verse 21. Yes, the birth of Jesus is a time of hope and a time of rejoicing. But within two years, the peace and tranquility comes to a bitter end.

And today, January 1st, 2023 we look back at the year gone by and again we recount the suffering, the travail, the sorrow in our world. This particular part of Matthew's gospel is not the exception to the rule in this fallen, broken world. It is the rule. The fact that Jesus and his parents barely escaped with their lives, and the entire Christmas story cannot really be told in all its brutal fullness without acknowledging that even the very salvation of this world could not come without being surrounded by the very mayhem and evil that Jesus came to fix.

Maybe some want to keep the birth of God's Messiah wrapped up in pretty paper or surrounded by twinkling lights. But that means that you are missing the real

punch of the Christmas story – God’s wider story that gets narrated from Genesis 1 through Revelation 22. This is a brutal world that God came to save; one that he had every right to turn his back on (as he nearly did in a time of a great flood). But God made a promise to save. He knew it would not be easy, not by a long shot. But he stuck with the world anyway. He knew that it would never work to wait for his creatures to get their acts together. God was going to have to do this bloody work himself. The slaughter of innocent toddler boys is proof positive of the very reason the work had to be done by God’s Son in the first place.

So we’re back to today and our own present day horrors, like wars and genocide, violence on the streets where bullets find even innocent targets, sex and drug trafficking, hate crimes and brutal attacks on innocent victims. Through Matthew’s written words, he does not answer the question of why God didn’t stop the slaughter in Bethlehem, nor does he help us understand why God doesn’t stop the slaughter in our world today. Even though Jesus was spared while he was a toddler, he died later on the cross for us. If it seems as though Jesus gets away leaving the other children to take the brutality, Jesus’ escape is only temporary. As a man, Jesus faces the brutality, the senseless violence, the repression born of insecurity that marks this story and too many other stories.

Don’t we long for a respite from the news reports that break our hearts, even if only for a few days this time of year? Matthew reminds us that we will not get such a break. The evil in the world keeps right on going. Christmas time even seems to make some of it worse, as we read of thieves making off with toys intended for charity; people’s gifts stolen from their cars or snatched from their arms on the street. We have never been promised an end to suffering, not have we been given an answer to the why of suffering. Matthew offers us something else. The title of Jesus, according to the angel in one of Joseph’s dreams is to be Emmanuel, God with Us. When we hear of terrible violence, unspeakable suffering, or tragic deaths, we should put away the idea that these things mean that God is not a work. Even in the deepest of tragedies, even when evil is at its most mystifying, God’s plan for salvation for the whole of creation has not been diverted. God’s ultimate joy and victory can never be derailed. God with Us. God is with us in the midst of suffering, bringing healing, and comfort. Whatever happens, God is with us. Now that Christmas is over and the decorations have

been put away, we really need to hear that. The glow from the Christmas lights may have faded and the media will certainly not report that God is present even in the midst of suffering. Only people of faith know about this good news. And because we know it, we must share it. Our God is our protector. Even as Herod's evil did not undo God's plan or wipe out God's Christ, so God is still marching on toward that day when a child will lead them and when God will declare "Behold, I make all things new. We cannot do that. God can and God will. Amen.