

December 29, 2019 / Matthew 2:13-23

“Time to get a move on!” (“20/20 vision”)

The Lord be with you. Well, here we are. The last Sunday of the year 2019. We have been “waiting” this Advent season. Christmas has come and now, we are three days away from 2020, or as JD said the other day, the appropriate sermon title for this Sunday should be “20/20 vision.”



I like that. And I wonder how many preachers are using that this morning!

Speaking of vision, I don’t know about you but I’m not very good at predicting or seeing what will be coming. Could I have predicted that my health would have been as good as it has been this past year? I had hoped, but I couldn’t have predicted. Or could I have predicted at the beginning of this year that I would be one of the pastors at Waterford at years end. Again, I could hope, but I could not have predicted that.

And likewise, I wonder if Joseph and Mary had predicted, could have seen what was coming their way the year the Magi



from the east showed up on their doorstep. I don’t know for a fact but I suspect that they had no idea of what was to come with that visit.

It’s just about 2020 and we don’t often know what’s coming. And sometimes what comes our way comes as an unwelcomed intrusion. Today’s gospel story is one of those unwelcome intrusions. Unwelcomed because it interrupts the joy of this season of celebration; unwelcomed because it reminds us, and quite frankly we don’t want to be reminded, just how hard, just how fragile and cruel and out of control life can be at times. This is a tough story, an unwelcomed story...but it is an important story none the less and I wonder what it has to say to us today as we not only celebrate the season of Christ’s birth, but also as we finish one year and begin the next.

Let me start this morning with the aspect of the evil that is in this story. It is the proverbial elephant in the room.



Historical accounts of Herod the Great suggest a ruler who was wily enough to switch allegiances when the winds blew in a different direction and cruel enough even to execute his own children and wives when politics demanded it. That is shocking to hear but this is apparently who this man was. Thought to be a descendent of Esau rather than Jacob, he was nonetheless named “King of the Jews” by the Roman Senate while he was in exile.

After reclaiming his throne – with help from his Roman connections and army – Herod settled down to the business of governing on behalf of Rome.

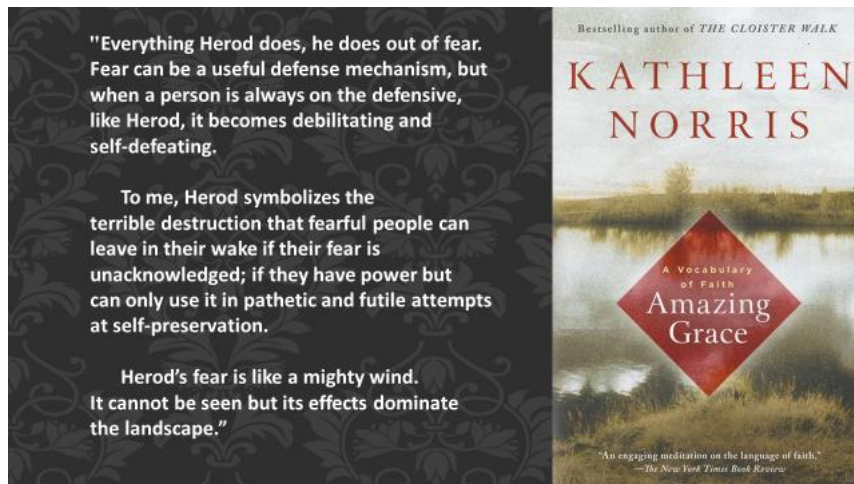


Over the next 30 plus years he built cities and sea ports and fortresses, including the famous Masada and the Herodium where he was buried. He improves the water supply to Jerusalem, lowers taxes, imports grain when there is famine and, most famously, does a massive expansion of the Temple of Jerusalem. Which begs the question, “was Herod all evil?” I don’t have an answer to that.

But yet, the long and the short of it is this. If his bloody response to a new threat from Bethlehem, a vulnerable child at that, is historically accurate, then he surely understood himself as acting out of political necessity, protecting his position and the progress he brought his kingdom; no different than history says he had done countless other times in countless other situations before the birth of Jesus. This is simply who he was.

And who he was, was someone who in many ways was acting out of fear, trying to remove anything that might represent a threat to him, no different than countless other people have done down through history. For any good that Herod did, he also brought much darkness to the land.

Christian author Kathleen Norris, in her book *Amazing Grace: a Vocabulary of Faith* which she wrote a number of years ago, talks about the fear of Herod.



"Everything Herod does, he does out of fear. Fear can be a useful defense mechanism, but when a person is always on the defensive, like Herod, it becomes debilitating and self-defeating.

To me, Herod symbolizes the terrible destruction that fearful people can leave in their wake if their fear is unacknowledged; if they have power but can only use it in pathetic and futile attempts at self-preservation.

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In the chapter entitled, "Herod" she writes, "Everything Herod does he does out of fear. Fear can be a useful defense mechanism, but when a person is always on the defensive, like Herod, it becomes debilitating and self-defeating. To me, Herod symbolizes the terrible destruction that fearful people can leave in their wake if their fear is unacknowledged; if they have power but can only use it in pathetic and futile attempts at self-preservation. Herod's fear is like a mighty wind. It cannot be seen but its effects dominate the landscape."

I found that last phrase quite illuminating when I first read it years ago, even more so today as I think about it. It would be quite easy to focus on those in power in our present day; those who seem more concerned about political self-preservation than serving the greater good of the country; whose fear is not acknowledged or named but none the less acts like a mighty wind whose effects dominate the landscape.

But focusing solely on that is the wrong focus for this sermon and really the wrong focus for our lives. I name this simply to draw attention to the fact that the human power

dynamics in play back then are still the dynamics in play today. And that the God who acted back then is still the God who acts today.



The God who said in Isaiah 43 "I will make a way in the wilderness; I will provide streams in the desert" is still doing that today! God never promised that we would never experience the wilderness; that we would never be caught in the slipstream of the mighty winds that negatively affect our landscapes. No! God just simply says, "I will make a way for you when you find yourself in these places." That is what should be in the forefront of our minds.

But I name what is taking place here in this story simply because they stand in such stark contrast from one another. And that is the fear of Herod vs. the fear of the Lord, or maybe another way to say it is

The Fear of the Lord (trust in God) vs The Fear of Herod (trust in self)

- *The fear of the Lord* is the Bible's code word for a full-bodied faith that includes not simply trembling before the mystery of a Transcendent God but also trusting in the tenderness and faithfulness of an imminent God, a God who is near.

the fear of Herod who places faith and trust in himself vs. the Faith of Mary and Joseph as they place their trust in God. That is what is taking place in this story.

“The fear of the Lord.” That is an interesting phrase. It appears numerous times in the Bible. It's a code word for a full-bodied faith that includes not simply trembling before the mystery of a Transcendent God but also trusting in the tenderness and faithfulness of an imminent God, a God who is near. It is a sensitivity to God's Spirit, God's movement in our lives. It's not just simply a head thing; it is a spirit thing as well. And the implications are huge.

In this story of Jesus so far here in Matthew, “the fear of the Lord” is there as

Mary responds to the angel on the news of her being with child. “Here am I, a servant of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word”. It is the source of Joseph's wordless obedience in changing his mind and marrying Mary rather than quietly dismissing her. It is there as Joseph dreams again and again and hears God's instruction for what to do and where to go and when to go. I would say it is even there as the Magi are sensitive to the God of the universe as they seek the star in search of the child and then respond to God's leading to go home another way rather than responding to the fear of Herod.

In our day,

The Fear of the Lord (trust in God) vs The Fear of Herod (trust in self)

- *The fear of the Lord* is the Bible's code word for a full-bodied faith that includes not simply trembling before the mystery of a Transcendent God but also trusting in the tenderness and faithfulness of an imminent God, a God who is near.
- *The fear of the Lord* opens us to the comfort and stamina God offers even in times of undeserved and profound suffering.
- *The fear of the Lord* sustains us even as we face the reality of an unknown future because we carry within us, just as Joseph and Mary carried with them, the goods news that we are accompanied by a God who will not abandons us.

when we open our doors, even just a crack, to allow the fear of the Lord to enter in, it opens us to the comfort and stamina God offers to us even in times of undeserved and profound suffering. It sustains us even as we face the reality of an unknown future because we carry within us, just as Joseph and Mary carried with them, the goods news that we are accompanied by a God who will not abandon us. The darkness, the shadows of fear are illuminated by the light—Immanuel, God with us! As God says in Isaiah 43,

The Fear of the Lord in Matthew 1 & 2



Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, c. 1660



Philippe de Champaigne c. 1643

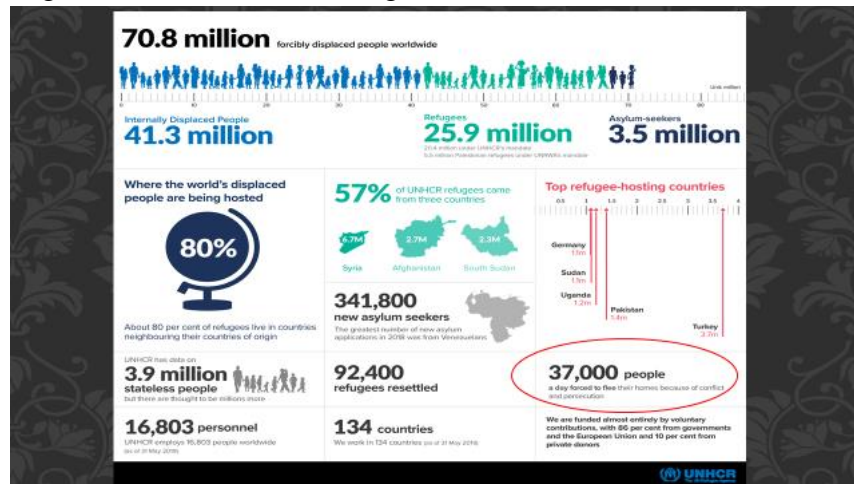


Vicente López Portaña c. 1805

“I will make a way.” And we see this Truth unfolding in this story.

But there is something else I notice in this story. And that is the word, “refugee.” That word is not there in black and white of the ink and paper, but it is there in the flesh and blood of this story. Jesus was, in this story, a refugee. I doubt that we often think of Jesus having been this as a child. We know they fled to Egypt but I suspect we miss the implications of that.

Last year, according to statistics from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees



something like 37,000 people were forced to flee their homes every day due to conflict or persecution. I have a hard time wrapping my head around that number, so let me put it this way. That is like the total population of Goshen Indiana, being force to leave their homes, every day. Every day, day after day, Goshen empties out.

I doubt that any of us would desire to experience this. We would rather stay here in our own homes, surrounded by friends

and family, in the culture we know and love. So would those who have had to leave. And those that have left this year, 2019, have added to the number of refugees worldwide.

There is worldwide, as you see at the top of the slide, something like 70.8 million refugees right now and over half of them are children. And again, that is hard to fathom. So many have had to make the horrible choice that it's safer to risk a perilous journey through the desert like Mary and Joseph did or over a sea, to live in a refugee camp, to be uprooted from what they know and love, but may not survive another day in it. And countries are trying to decide what to do with the influx of people. It is a real struggle with very real implications.

I struggle with this story. It is scandalous on the one hand, that the God of the universe would allow the tyranny of some little worm of a man like Herod to cause Jesus to become, along with his parents, refugees. They leave, fleeing a tyrant who doesn't care if children live or die.

But then it is scandalous as well, is it not, that children in our own towns and cities are hungry, neglected, abused and afraid. It is scandalous, is it not, that so much of the world stands by as children in other countries, often brown-skinned and of a different religion from ours, suffer deeply from hunger or from the seeming triumph of evil. That is what is reflected in this chart. It is scandalous. It is heart breaking.

Incarnation

- In Jesus, our ancient Christian doctrine says that God has taken on humanity.... in all its forms. This is literally what happens at Christmas. God has taken on the form of humanity.
- It didn't mean all would go well..... but God is in the business of redemption.



In Jesus, our ancient Christian doctrine says that God has taken on humanity.... in all its forms. This is literally what happens at Christmas. God has taken on the form of humanity. It didn't mean that all would go well though. But God is in the business of redemption.

We don't know much about Jesus' childhood so I can only guess but I can imagine that some of Jesus' earliest memories may have been sensing the fear in his parents' voices as they try and keep him safe. I say this simply because I remember once, fear, real fear in my parent's voices when I was younger; they were trying to keep me safe too. It made an impression. It's not difficult to imagine either that as the little family survives; they surely experience grief over the children who are not saved, perhaps some of them friends.

Imagining even further, I wonder, are Joseph and Mary and Jesus warmly received in Egypt? That's highly unlikely for what's old is new and what's new is old. As they and other refugees arrive, their Egyptian neighbors and officials surely complained about "those people" who dress differently, observe a different religion and don't understand or respect local customs.

"That carpenter is going to take someone else's job. They need to learn our language!" It doesn't take much to imagine that life would not have been easy for this refugee family. There were no built in local or governmental programs in place. Perhaps that was part of the reason for the gifts that were given by the Magi; resources for the next part of the journey; God providing a way. I don't know.

I find it probable though, highly probable, just as it is in my life that these early life experiences, the stories recounted by his parents, help to shape Jesus' later ministry to the people on the margins – those who are displaced, set aside or who by illness or race are ostracized. For we see him, we see Jesus warmly accepting people from other places, religions, races and gender. He eats with them, laughs with them, and welcomes the outsider in.

And so I wonder.

Incarnation

- What does Incarnation look like in our day? Is it simply the human form Jesus took? Or.....
- Could incarnation reflect humans taking on the character of God as the "fear of the Lord" dwells deeply in them as it dwelled in Jesus?



Could it be that incarnation in our day is not just simply God taking on human form which we tend to think of? Could it also reflect humans, human beings taking on the character of God as


the fear of the Lord dwells deeply in them just as it dwelled in Jesus?

I hope you don't misunderstand me. I'm not trying to equate us with Jesus or God on anything like that. This is simply about the radical truth and beauty of Christmas and the implications of it because this is what we celebrate! The light has come into the world and the world cannot put it out. (John. 1:5). And as God's Spirit rests in us, we become part of the light of God.

And so I wonder, as this Christmas season fades into the year 2020, how will this intrusive story live on in us? This is a hard story, but this story is really about a lessening of fear's shadowy power by an increase in the available light.

Lessening the Darkness

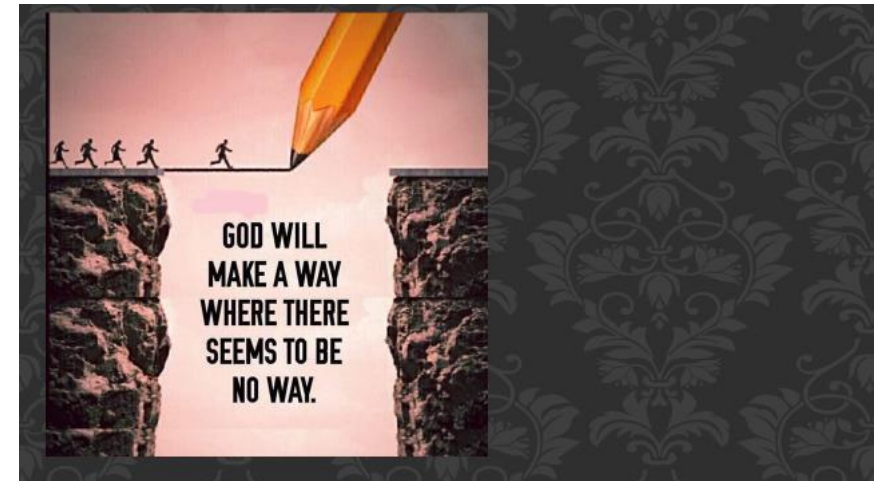
- As harsh as this story is, there also lies within it a larger truth....the lessening of the darkness. And that simply means that as difficult as our lives at times can be, there also resides within each of us, because of the birth of Christ, the possibility of the lessening of the darkness....of God providing a way through.



That is really the story of Jesus. It is a story about how the darkness is lessened...the way that God is providing. And without the difficult parts it's only a sweet fairy tale.

Jesus the refugee, the suffering servant, the prophet without a home, no place to rest his head—gives our faith

meaning, context and purpose. As harsh as this story is, there also lies within it, a larger truth....the lessening of the darkness. And that simply means that as difficult as our lives can be at times, there also resides within each of us, because of the birth of Christ, the possibility of the lessening of the darkness....




of God providing a way through.....pause.

And so 2020...the invitation:

Lessening the Darkness

2020 Invitation

- How are you going to enter into the lessening of the darkness that God is doing in this next year of time?"
- Offering grace / forgiveness?
- Companion to lonely / feeding hungry?
- Giving the gift of time?
- Caring for others?
- Lessening darkness is a sign of hope!



“How are you going to enter into the lessening of the darkness that God is doing in this next year of time?” Maybe it will be

giving yourself some grace, some much needed forgiveness for something you struggle with. God has offered that to you. But you are having a hard time believing and receiving it.

Maybe the lessening of the darkness will come by being a companion to the lonely; or being someone who helps to feed the hungry. Maybe it will come as you give the gift of time to someone who is overwhelmed. Maybe it is there as you care for family, or friends, or a neighbor. Maybe it will be as a courageous soul who supports refugees as they flee from tyranny, despair, and fear so that their children will have a chance.

I don't know if it has been in the forefront of your minds during the hustle and bustle of this Christmas but Christmas is a sign of hope. That is the reason for the celebration. And we as followers of Christ are called to be signs of hope. That's the whole point; a lessening of the darkness....individually and collectively as a church.

Have you ever received a lessening of the darkness in your life? Have you ever given a lessening of the darkness? They are both incredibly powerful. It gives both the giver and the receiver the gift of hope.

Lessening the darkness; a sign of hope. I hope that this image will stay with you as you move through this New Year. Because I can't predict what winds are going to blow across our landscapes this coming year. Some of them might be pretty fierce. But I can hope that no matter what happens, we will have the courage to lessen fear's shadowy power and increase the available light. That we will be part of the way that God is making as God makes "a way" in the wilderness.



The theme of this Advent season has been "What are you waiting for?" Well, it's just about 2020; and it is never to early or too late to lessen the darkness of this world. Christ has been born. Glory to God in the highest; and on earth: peace, good will among people. May God bless you. Amen.