

When the Star in the Sky Is Gone
Matt 2: 13-23
January 13, 2019
First Baptist Church, Pottstown
Rev. Dr. Marcia B. Bailey, preaching

As I sat down to write this I was distracted by the noise of the trash truck which had come into my quiet neighborhood to haul away the Christmas trees. Mine had been lying in the garage for the last 10 days; it had been ages since I took it down, or so it seemed. It is only the 13th day of the New Year, only a few weeks since the joyous celebration of the birth of Christ: a brand-new baby, adoring parents, the smell of sweet hay, the songs of angels... all drowned out now not only by rumbling of the trash truck but by the rancorous arguing of elected leaders who continue to fail to make any headway in returning 800,000 government employees to work, compounding the dysfunction of an already broken system. In the midst of what is now the longest government shut down ever, the hopeful proclamations of “joy to the world” and “peace on earth” seem more elusive than ever as bitterness seeps deeper and deeper into the cavernous divide that separates Republicans from Democrats, affluent from marginalized, secure from seeking. And then comes this text from Matthew, the lectionary reading for the week immediately after Dec 25, with its own trio of horrors: the “escape to Egypt”, the “massacre of the innocents”, and the Holy Family’s own migrant journey from a foreign land in search of a new home.

It’s a lot.... all of it.

But it’s where we find ourselves. The question is, what do we do? How do we live? What difference does it make that Christ is born? What does “Emmanuel” mean today?

There are hard truths in this text, truths we know but like to avoid on Sunday morning. It speaks to the truth about the abusive use of power, about the systemic reality of sin, about the

controlling nature of fear, about the damaging results of hatred. But it also points to the contrasting wisdom of the Divine in the face of human folly, and it reminds us that from the start, the God who comes among us did not escape the terrors of this world any more than we can.

This is what God-with-us looks like.

Let's start with Joseph. More angels. Don't you think he might just have said, "What? Again?!" Without frame of reference for this whole manger birth scene we might think it was little more than an extended visit to another town on government business, but it clearly lasts longer than that; this census taking was important to the Roman's continued occupation of Palestine and travel, especially with a newborn, was not easily done. It is perhaps fully two years later that we find Mary and Joseph still in Bethlehem where this angel appears again to warn them to get out Israel quickly; unchecked fear is afoot.

That fear belonged to the irrational Herod the Great, the one who ruled Judea from 39BCE until his death in 4BCE. His "reign of terror" was documented in detail by the ancient historian Josephus and included such things as dropping crates filled with soldiers over hillsides to massacre bandits hiding in caves, slaughtering opponents, and enlarging the Temple in an effort to turn it into his own memorial, seizing the High Priests' robes and holding them hostage in the process. At the end of his life as Herod lay dying, according to Josephus, he rounded up hundreds of thousands of citizens, ordered them into the hippodrome and then commanded his children to slaughter them all at his death as a memorial to his power and might and as a guarantee of national mourning. Josephus writes,

Having done these things, Herod died five days after he killed his (oldest) son, [Antipater](#). He was a man cruel to all alike: angry with his inferiors and haughty to the righteous.

But before the king's death was found out, Salome and Alexas [his children] sent back to their homes those who had been summoned to the hippodrome.

No wonder Joseph and Mary were quick to heed the angel's warning.

And so, they made the arduous journey to Egypt where they knew no one, didn't speak the language, had no place to live, no family to support them, no job to earn resources...not at all unlike those women, children and men who sit on our *own* nation's southern border, who are held in detention centers, locked up in prisons, who are fleeing from corrupt and violent governments all across Central America. Emmanuel... **this** is what "God-with-us" looks like.

Meanwhile, according to Matthew, Herod's madness reaches every family, every male child under the age of 2, as he orders them all slaughtered in an effort to discover the Christ. For every family who has lost a child, at any age; for any parent who has held their broken baby's body in their arms; for the parents of African American sons cut down; for the families of children killed in school shootings, the cry of Rachel, the anguish of a wailing mother and father, is seen and heard and felt in this text, "refusing to be consoled" until there is justice...**this** is what Emmanuel looks like.

And then text tells us that Joseph gets yet *another* angel message, that it is safe to return. But not to Bethlehem, because the new ruler, Herod's son, is no better than the last. So, no return "home" to the place that their child had been born, to familiar streets and to newly minted friends. No return for people displaced by devastating fires, for those hunted by immigration officers, for those who take shelter beneath overpasses and on heating grates. Emmanuel is found **here** as well.

Matthew tells us they finally settle in Nazareth. The passage Matthew quotes isn't found in the Hebrew Bible; perhaps the writer is linking Jesus to the Nazorite tradition, to a vow taken by one to become "holy unto the Lord", echoing the commitment of Samson and Samuel, later John the

Baptizer and even the Apostle Paul. And it is there that we are told the family settles, puts down roots, raises the God-boy and helps him to integrate this marginalized, migrant, terrorizing beginning into a life of service and sacrifice. Out of their experience with all of it. Out of their experience with God.

And that's the **good news** of this heavy, burdensome text: that Joseph, Mary, and Jesus **experience God**, in the midst of great trauma and trial, in the midst of unspeakable atrocities and real but unnecessary fear. God **meant** it when God promised to be **with us, to come among us, to be one of us**. This is what the world looks like, then and now, and God did not turn away but rather entered into in the fullest way possible. Can we do less?

The poem that is on your bulletin cover is the focus our of worship as we enter this New Year under the shadow of violence and fear and turmoil not unlike that of Jesus' own experience. The Christmas trees are gone; the baby's no longer in the manger. But the Light of the World **has come!** And that should make a difference; **we** should make a difference. Because we are greedy recipients of that Light, we need to be *courageous bearers* of the same, not saving ourselves by looking away, not shielding ourselves behind stained glass, songs of hope, or even prayers for peace. This Light came because the world needed it and it needs it still. This Light still shines because the shadows continue to be great, because the lessons are not learned, because we have not made use of the resources we have at hand to effect the changes we seek, the transformation possible.

Howard Thurman (1899-1981) ranks among the greatest African American theologians, educator, and civil rights leaders of this and any time. He was the Dean of the Chapels of both Howard and Boston Universities, authored twenty-one books and was the mentor who, with the coaching of Ghandi, taught Martin Luther King, Jr and other civil rights leaders the strength of

non-violent action, which became the cornerstone of the civil rights movement. Thurman writes these words for such a time as this:

“When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,

The work of Christmas begins...”

Over the next weeks we will explore the “work” Thurman and the Gospel call to us... the work of righting the injustices of our world beginning in our own neighborhoods, in our own homes. We will lean into the “hard” edges of texts like the one we considered this morning; you might be uncomfortable but so is living in these days.

Now that the celebrations are over, the “work of Christmas” has just begun. Light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not put it out. YOU are the Light in this place: in this congregation, in this neighborhood, in your home, job or school. It’s a joyous burden to offer an alternative to what we see and hear around us, but we carry that together. And we share it with all those of many faiths and followings who have also seen Light, and who, like us, are daring to follow it. We, like the Holy Family, are not alone nor unguided. *Emmanuel has come; God is with us.*