

Matthew 2:13-23

ENTERING INTO THE FRAY

There was a famous incident that took place on Christmas Eve of 1914 amid the horrors of World War I. The war was only five months old, and approximately 800,000 men had been wounded or killed. But on that Christmas Eve something happened that was unique in humankind's bloody history. British soldiers raised "Merry Christmas" signs above their trenches. The German soldiers responded in kind. Soon Christmas carols were heard from German and British trenches alike.

Christmas Day found unarmed soldiers from both sides meeting in the middle of no man's land for song and conversation. Exchanging small gifts, they passed Christmas Day peacefully. This outbreak of peace occurred for miles along the battlefield. At one spot, the British played soccer with the Germans, who won 3-2.

In some places, the spontaneous truce continued the next day, as neither side was willing to fire the first shot. Finally, fighting was resumed when fresh troops arrived, and the high command of both armies ordered that further "informal understandings" with the enemy would be punishable as treason.

That opening story, which resonates with "good news-bad news," serves to introduce the Gospel lesson. So soon after Christmas, like it or not, the scripture reading reflects the way things are in the world. The good and the bad are all mixed together.

After the lovely Christmas story about the birth of our Lord Jesus in the manger, the love of Mary and Joseph for God and their newborn son, the adoration of the shepherds and the choir of heavenly angels, followed by the visit of the gift-bearing Magi, the story takes a turn for the worse. Joseph was warned (by an angel), in a dream, to take Jesus and Mary and flee to Egypt and remain there until further notice. After all, King Herod was up to no good; he wanted to destroy the Holy Child, whom Herod deemed was a threat to his power and his throne. Although Joseph doesn't speak a single word in the gospel stories surrounding Jesus' birth, nevertheless, his faithful obedience to God and devotion to his family speaks volumes! Joseph awoke from his dream and took Mary and Jesus by night and fled to Egypt.

Back in Jerusalem, when the wise men failed to report to King Herod as to the location of the child, who had been born king of the Jews, Herod flew into a rage. He sent his soldiers to Bethlehem to kill all of the children two years old and younger. It's been estimated that Herod's henchmen killed eighteen to thirty male children.

What a horrible conclusion to the beautiful Christmas story: from the birth of Jesus to the slaughter of the innocents. We move from singing "O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie..." to the sound of "wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled because they are no more." Here, today, we encounter the other side of Bethlehem, real-life Bethlehem where children are slaughtered by a jealous and crazy king. This Bethlehem is like any other town or city in the world – even Martinsville – where good and bad intermingle.

The various forms of media remind us daily that we live in a violent and evil world. By faith, we sing, "This is my Father's world," and we affirm the goodness of God's creation. And yet, we cannot ignore or deny the fact that it is also a world where human sinfulness permeates life. The harm that befalls people is quite often either self-imposed or caused by other people. I don't want to dwell on the bad news because you know all too well the evil that is loose in the world, and, because this is a day for proclaiming the Good News of the Gospel.

It is precisely because there was and there is human sinfulness and evil in the world, that God sent forth the Son. God came to us in a very personal way – as a human being - to be with us. Even now, God comes to the worst places and the most painful circumstances to share in our suffering and to care for us in the midst of tragedy. Christ has come to be with us in our sorrows. We have not been left alone. Furthermore, his name is Jesus on purpose – “for he will save his people from their sins.” Jesus lived up to his name by dying on the cross and then rising from the grave.

All of this was God’s providential plan at work in the midst of a darkened, sin-ridden world. God, in Jesus Christ, entered into the fray and did battle with all of the demonic forces and evil powers and conquered the enemies, sin and death. And, his victory is our victory.

Jesus’ ministry of compassion and service to others is our ministry as well. God calls us to enter into the fray also. Like Joseph and Mary before us, we are to live in faithful obedience in order to do God’s will by doing Christ’s work here on earth. Joseph and Mary cared for the Christ child by carrying him to Egypt and then, after Herod’s death and another dream, they made their home in Nazareth of Galilee. Even “though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the Ruler yet. This is my Father’s world: The battle is not done...” and that’s where we come into the picture and enter into the fray. We are chosen by God to do our part, whether large or small, to join in the battle and faithfully do what we can to bring about God’s kingdom here on earth.

Our service to God can take many forms. Sometimes, all God asks of us is to simply show up and be there for another hurting person. This true story is told about Dr. William Sloane Coffin, who was the pastor of Riverside Church in New York City. When a man in his church lost a loved one, the funeral service was held on a cold, miserable day. After everyone else left the gravesite, the man stayed there, in the rain and cold, for several hours, dealing with his grief. When he finally turned around to go back to his car, directly behind him stood his pastor. Dr. Coffin had stood with him the entire time to offer comfort to one of his own.

This past week a church member was at a store when a woman approached her and asked if she could help her pay for her prescription. The bill was ten dollars and the woman said that all she had was a five-dollar bill. Our member didn’t have five dollars but she offered to pay for the prescription with her debit card and told the woman to keep her five dollars. The woman was very grateful for her help. Afterwards, the church member told me, “It felt good to be able to help her out.”

When we give of ourselves to another person in need there is great joy and fulfillment. When we reach out in love to others – especially the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the sick, the poor, and the prisoner – we can be sure that we are reaching out to and embracing our Lord Jesus. When we enter into the fray to work alongside of Jesus, at the same time, he invites us into his presence to come and sup with him and others at his table. In the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, we behold his glory, and, from his fullness, we all receive, grace upon grace. As we are fed with bread and wine and his presence, we are strengthened and sent out to serve.

Howard Thurman wrote down this thought entitled *After Christmas*:

When the song of 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 flocks,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,

To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among brothers (and sisters),
To make music in the heart.

When we do the work of Christmas (after Christmas), we spread the good news of Emmanuel – God with us all – throughout the year. Let us enter the fray, and, through our compassionate giving, let us make music in the hearts of others. As we do so, we bring gifts of glory, honor, and praise to God. Amen.

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