

## “Running Away”

Matthew 2:13-23

Now that the holidays are over, attack ads are coming our way. At least this is what the Rochester paper informed us on the day after Christmas. Politicians evidently have been playing it nice in honor of Christmas, but now that this is out of the way, they can really get down to business and play it dirty! Enough good news, let's get to the bad news. I find this really interesting in connection to our Bible story this morning. Almost immediately after the birth of Jesus, the Gospel of Matthew tells us about him running away to Egypt. There is great irony in this text. After the proclamation of Jesus as the Son of God -- Emmanuel -- God with us, we see "God-with-us" fleeing for his life. We see the "savior" needing to be saved from Herod's anger. The tears of Rachel are remembered for her children because she died in child birth.

What happened? Can't God the almighty, the creator of the universe, do something other than run away? Why running away instead of defeating Herod? We can understand the suffering of those who "deserve" it, but what about those who are clearly innocent? What about the slaughter of the babies who were left in Bethlehem? What about those children who become refugees and lose their home without a fault of their own? What about the 2.5 million children living with HIV around the world? What about the 2.1 million people who died of AIDS during 2007? In our own country, one in every eight children under the age of twelve suffers from hunger. Forty percent of the poor in this country are children. Every day more than 100 babies born in our country die before their first birthday. About one million teenagers become pregnant each year, and as many as 18% of newborns in some city hospitals are born exposed to alcohol, crack and other hard drugs. What about the suffering we endure in our lives because of the cruelty or anger of others? What about when a young teenager dies suddenly in a car accident?

This is an age old question because as people of God we are not protected from suffering. Most of us have known it firsthand. Even when we are not personally suffering we know someone who is and we live in a world that is suffering.

There are so many explanations out there for suffering. Some people of faith with good intentions will tell you, God has a good reason for your suffering: You will get stronger this way, you are being prepared for something bigger in life, God allows you to suffer so that you will learn a lesson, etc. Others will tell you: suffering is part of life. There is no God, because if God was real, then how could such a God allow the suffering of people? Still others, will tell you that suffering is the result of our human sin and greed. There are all kinds of explanations based on our different understandings of God.

Yet, in the Gospel story of today we are not given an answer to the question about suffering, but a new twist on our understanding of God. The God-with-us, Emmanuel, comes to us in the form of a human baby being vulnerable and open to suffering. This Emmanuel does not change the world through power and might but through entering the depth of our suffering. God in Jesus Christ runs away to Egypt as a refugee with no official immigration status. The problem comes when we don't understand that God is with us when we suffer, when we separate God from our human suffering. For some people, their image of God is "Our Father who art in heaven" and that is where Jesus lives, safely up there in heaven, where there is no divorce, no cancer, no accidents, no bullets, no bombs, no wars, no assassinations. In our minds, God is like we are: we move away from our violent neighborhoods on earth and we move to the suburbs and God has moved to the suburb in the sky. That is where God lives, up there, up where it is safe, up there, removed from it all. No. It is just the opposite. Our God left the safety and sanity of heaven and came down to this violent neighborhood called Earth. God became a real human being, and therefore suffered and died, like the rest of us do.

I remember one time serving as a chaplain in a hospital in Louisville, KY when I was called in to help with a family who was losing their 4 year-old daughter. When I walked into the room, there were tears and angry words. The mother looked like she had not slept for several days. When I introduced myself as the chaplain, the mother said to me, "Oh great, a representative from God, well, where is God when you need God?" "Why does God want my little angel?" "Does not God have enough souls up there?" "Is it too much to keep my sweetheart here?" There were no words that I could have said that would have made any difference for that mother. Yet, I knew that God was there in the tears she was shedding. God was there embracing the hearts of those who grieved.

Another experience of God in the midst of suffering was in Cana, Lebanon. This is a small Shiite town in southern Lebanon where on the 18<sup>th</sup> of April of every year, people remember the death of over 150 women and

children killed by an Israeli bomb a few years ago. The people who were killed were hiding from Israeli bombs in a United Nations' building. The pictures on the wall were worse than any horror movie we can ever watch. There were no words to describe the pain of the people who lost loved ones there, but I knew in my heart that God was in those pictures and was with those who suffered such terrible death. God was there embracing their suffering.

A great movie was released this year called "Amazing Grace" based on the true story of a man who knew how to enter and embrace human suffering. The man's name is William Wilberforce. He was a British politician and philanthropist in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In 1787 he came into contact with Thomas Clarkson and a group of anti-slave trade activists. In a powerful scene in the movie, Willberforce's new friends showed him the shackles that were used for the slaves on slave trade ships. They told him about the horrors and deaths from the slave trade. They helped him enter into the suffering of slaves that his heart was converted and he took on the cause of ending the slave trade. One of his tactics to help people see the pain of the slaves was to invite them to get close to a slave ship where they smelled the stench of death and abuse. It took him 30 years to win the battle against the slave trade. Thirty years of suffering that took its toll on his health and life. All of this was because he dared to walk with God into the suffering of others. He knew that God was there suffering with the people who were enslaved. That walk into suffering changed our human history and brought transformation and healing to many.

In the flight to Egypt, we can see that God is part of our human experience of suffering. We can't really understand why there is so much innocent suffering in the world, but what we can understand and experience is that we are never alone in our suffering. God is with us, as a refugee in Egypt, as an asylum seeker, as a grieving mother, as a war victim, and as a trusted friend who understands our pain. God is with us bringing healing to our lives not through power and might, but through gentleness and love. We are invited to journey with God in the world, to enter into those places of suffering in our lives, with our friends and with the poor and oppressed. Our natural tendency is to avoid suffering at all costs, but the message of the Gospel for us today is to have courage to enter into those places of great suffering and to join God in the work of transformation. In your bulletin today there is an insert of Faith in Action inviting you to enter into the pain of refugees in the world. I hope that you will take this home and learn more about the issues of refugees in the world. It is certainly not uplifting to read about refugees, but this is where you see Jesus most clearly.

Leaning into our pain and the suffering of our world is the only way out. There is no way around it. We have to go through it in order to heal. May we have the courage and grace to walk with Christ into the heart of our suffering and into the suffering of others. I would like to end with these words from a poem by Presbyterian Ann Weems:

*There is a cross in the manger  
 If there is no cross in the manger, there is no Christmas.  
 If the Babe doesn't become the Adult, there is no Bethlehem star.  
 If there is no commitment in us, there are no Wise Men searching.  
 If we offer no cup of cold water, there is no gold, no frankincense, no myrrh.  
 If there is no praising God's name, there are no angels singing.  
 If there is no spirit of alleluia, there are no shepherds watching.  
 If there is no standing up, no speaking out, no risk, there is no Herod, no flight into Egypt.  
 If there is no room in our inn, then "Merry Christmas" mocks the Christ Child,  
 and the Holy Family is just a holiday card,  
 and God will loathe our feasts and festivals.  
 If there is no forgiveness in us, there is no cause for celebration.  
 If Christmas is not now, if Christ is not born into the everyday present,  
 then what is all the noise about?*

*From Kneeling in Bethlehem by Ann Weems*