

“Is It Still Christmas?”  
Matthew 2:13-23

Today is the big day for after Christmas returns and exchanges. The stores are buzzing with people who are returning or exchanging items that they did not want or did not fit them. People are concerned about getting what they want in the right size or color. Yet, retailers are worried about losing money and often have hidden restocking fees. It is in many places in our country a shopping frenzy! What is interesting about all of this is that it happens on December 26 as if Christmas is really over. Of course, from a shopping point of view, Christmas is over because the gifts have been given and the food has been consumed. But from the perspective of faith we know that Christmas is not over officially until January 6. And if we are truly serious about our faith, every day is Christmas day when God comes into our lives and our human experience. Yet today's Bible story which is part of the Christmas story does not feel like Christmas. It is a part of the story that makes us uncomfortable. After we have heard about dreams, the manger, the shepherd, the miracle of love and faith, we are confronted with the deep suffering and pain of our world. Just as we are really ready to celebrate the birth of the Messiah, we are told about a massacre, the slaughter of infants. We are told about a horrific event as part of the birth story of Jesus. This part of the story is a sobering part! It is not one that most people feel comfortable with because it raises the whole question of the meaning of innocent suffering. Why would God allow such suffering to take place? What is even more disturbing about this story is the conclusion that is often made from a superficial reading of this text that God allowed this suffering to take place in order to accomplish a greater mission with Jesus and his family having to flee to Egypt, in order to have the birth of Jesus fit the description of an old prophecy. So how do we deal with this difficult part of the story without losing faith in God's goodness and the excitement of the birth of Christ? I think this part of the story is essential to Matthew's narrative. Matthew was trying to tell the story of the Gospel about Jesus to help the early followers of Christ to see and understand that Jesus was the Messiah. Jesus is the one God was sending to help save Israel from the domination systems of their day. The work of the Messiah was not seen as only spiritual work. The work of the Messiah encompassed all of life with all of its aspects. Therefore the daily suffering of the people was at the heart of the message of the Gospel. What Jesus worked to address and transform was not only the hearts and minds of people but also the social systems that oppressed them. The birth of the Messiah did not take place in a lofty place away from the political and economic realities of the people. In fact, the language of the birth of Jesus was very intentional in setting the stage for people to understand that Jesus offered an alternative vision for society. The word for Gospel (good news) in Greek was the same word that was used for Augustus, the emperor. This was a technical term used by the Roman propaganda machine about the emperor. It is quite radical for the story of Jesus to be presented as good news! It is as if the writers of the Gospels were saying that Jesus is the true ruler of the world and his rule is very different. His rule provides a sharp contrast from that of the powers of domination. That is why the story of the slaughter of innocent boys does fit in the story of the birth of Jesus.

We can see the destructive powers of the domination system of Herod as being threatened by the birth of Jesus because he was bringing a kingdom of a different kind. This story is reminiscent of the story of Moses and the Exodus of the people of Israel from Egypt. Moses' life was threatened in the same way because Pharaoh had ordered the killing of the infants of the Hebrew people in Egypt. Moses had to be hidden in order to save his life. Moses grew up and helped lead the people of Israel out of Egypt, out of the oppression of slavery into the Promised Land. God has always worked this way. Even though the domination systems of our world seem so strong and so undefeatable, God's love comes in a powerful way through leaders like Moses and Jesus and the whole system of oppression is deconstructed.

This is a very powerful and important part of the message of Christmas because it reminds us that God is actively involved in healing and redeeming our world through love. This is a much needed message for us because the slaughter of the innocents continues in our world today. Brian Urquhart, in his review of the book, *A Problem From Hell* by Samantha Power, wrote, "During the twentieth century there were not only two world wars but at least six major cases of genocide – the mass killing of the Armenians by Turks in 1915, of Jews (and other groups such as the Gypsies) by Hitler, of Cambodians by the Khmer Rouge, of the Kurds of northern Iraq by Saddam Hussein, of the Tutsi of Rwanda by the Hutu, and of Croats, Muslims and the Albanians of Kosovo by the Serbs. In all cases except the Kosovo Albanians, the international community and its Western leaders failed to act in time." Innocent people continue to suffer in the world because of the greed and ruthlessness of many who are in power. We can despair and say that there is no hope for change because the powers are too strong and too great. We can pretend that these problems are not happening in our world today by focusing only on ourselves and our needs. We can blame it all on God with an understanding that God wills evil in the world. But this part of the Christmas story helps us guard against such temptations. The Christmas story is not a fairy tale. It is deeply rooted in the struggles and realities of our world. It is a story that shows us that God enters and redeems our struggles but only through love.

We live in a world where there is great temptation to believe in fear. For example, researchers at Johns Hopkins University reported that 30 years ago, the greatest fears of grade school children were: 1) Animals, 2) Being in a dark room, 3) High places, 4) Strangers, 5) Loud noises. Today, kids are afraid of the following: 1) Divorce, 2) Nuclear war, 3) Cancer, 4) Pollution, 5) Being mugged. Our fears seem to be growing and there are people who make a great deal of money selling us fear! Yet, we do not have to choose the path of fear because we know that it is still Christmas! We can choose to believe in the real power of our world, the power of God's love. All the other options to deal with our fears are illusions and temptations. No military power can truly make us safe. No home security system can truly make us feel safe. No wealth or human power and control can truly make us feel safe. Only God's love can bring us true transformation of our systems and our hearts because it is not coercive and it is not based on the principles of power and control. "The only capital with which Jesus came into the world," Dorothee Soelle writes, "was his love, and it was as powerless and as powerful as love is. Jesus had nothing but his love with which to win our heart. There is

no higher being to save us, because the only salvation in life is to become love. No higher being can save us, because the only salvation is to become love.”

Christmas challenges us to ask important questions of ourselves and our world, “How are we becoming love?” “Does our life reflect the values and fears of Herod or does it reflect the values and love of Christ?” “Do we take the easy well-known path of violence and domination or do we follow the costly path of love and peace?” Which story captures our imagination and hearts?

I would like to conclude with a story about a young man who is following the path of love in his life and is bringing hope and redemption to the world around him. This was a story on National Public Radio in early December. It featured William Harvey, a young Juilliard-trained violinist who is using music to bridge cultural divides in an unlikely place, Afghanistan. Harvey had just begun his studies at Juilliard days before the September 11 attacks and he soon found himself playing his violin for those who had been working at “ground zero.” The evident impact of the concert on those for whom he played changed his life. He realized that music is more than performance. It is a central part of life and could unite people across cultures and countries. Harvey contacted the State Department to see if they would be interested in sending him on a tour to Afghanistan. They weren’t, but the idea stayed with him. In 2005 Harvey founded *Cultures in Harmony*, a non-profit organization that aims to promote cultural understanding through music. Harvey and his team have conducted projects in 19 countries, sending what he calls “musical diplomats” to countries such as Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, Cameroon, and Egypt. These “musical diplomats” hold master classes for aspiring musicians, collaborate with local musicians in offering music, and seek out opportunities to learn about the local musical traditions. When Harvey realized that his work for *Cultures in Harmony* “didn’t pay the rent” he began to look for actual employment. He responded to an ad for musicians to teach in Afghanistan’s newly established *National Institute of Music* and was accepted. Harvey set off for Kabul in March of this year. In the short time he has been there, Harvey has become convinced that his work is having an impact on the students at the institute, which offers free music lessons for orphans and street children. As an example, Harvey tells of a student whose father is paralyzed as the result of being beaten by the government ten years ago and her mother who takes in laundry to earn a little money for the family. Instead of selling gum on the streets, this student is learning to play the violin. Though part of the Department of Western Music, Harvey incorporates Afghan folk tunes played on traditional Afghan instruments into his teaching. He has even written an arrangement for the Afghan national anthem that incorporates both Western and Afghan instruments.

May the spirit of Christ continue to inspire us to live in the ways of love and may the spirit of the Christmas season always be with us during this season and beyond. Amen.