

## Let's Talk About Christmas

Date: December 31, 2006

Text: Isaiah 63: 7-9; Matthew 2: 13-23

A lot of TV shows feature year-end reflections on 2006. We might think of our two scripture lessons following that pattern and presenting a mirror on what the last twelve months have been like. On the positive side, the prophet Isaiah says that God's people should "recount the gracious deeds of the Lord." The passage from Matthew, which tells of the murder of innocent children, reveals the other side of humanity, its ugliness and brutality. At the end of 2006, let's take a look at both sides of the human experience.

Isaiah, when pausing to reflect on the past, realized that there was good reason to give thanks because it was "no messenger or angel but God's presence" that had saved his people. Quite an extraordinary statement when angels are so popular for the prophet to declare that God did not send the second team but rather came himself to lead his people. Later on, the prophecy is fulfilled in the form of a small child wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. As we have been saying throughout Advent, God's has made light to shine in the darkness.

Probably for most of us 2006 has been a mixture of good and bad but the question is whether through all the experiences have we been guided by that divine star in the sky? If we have, then, cannot all of us in very personal ways think back to moments and occasions when surely it was the hand of God lifting us up joyfully or tearfully? It's been a year of marriages, anniversaries, new births, and growth in the life of the church but also death and other problems. In the midst of whatever has been the Bible declares that God has been good to us in 2006 because in Christ He has shared in our lives.

It's appropriate to pause and ask what are the blessings that you are most grateful for in the last 12 months.

Unfortunately, "blessings" are not the whole story and, as I said in the beginning, the Bible is not into reality TV where difficulties are dealt with so lightly. The flight of the Holy Family into Egypt and the slaughter of the innocents is a terrible story akin to some of the horror tales emerging from ethnic and tribal wars around the world. It's not surprising that this part of the Christmas story seldom gets heard because of its harshness. I read in a book about the development of Christmas customs in this country that around the turn of the century when commercialism was beginning to take off, the churches of NYC made a concentrated effort to hold on to the true message of the season. One pastor during Advent preached on Christ dying on the cross and a parishioner walked out. He didn't want that kind of stuff spoiling his Christmas.

It's human nature to try to avoid the bad stuff but in so doing we keep Christmas and all of life from moving to a different level. One criticism I have heard of worship based solely on praise music is that it does not allow the congregation to lament, to weep, and deal with the harsh realities of life. In the story from Matthew, Herod is the personification of evil. Later it will be Caiphas and Pontius Pilate and, of course, we could move into recent history and speak of Hitler or Saddam and many others. These men in scripture, who represent worldly power and greed, try to prevent Christ from carrying out his mission and in so doing symbolize all the evil in the world that keeps getting in the way of God's design for his people.

How can we explain the horrors committed against indigenous people in Guatemala and the brutality of civil war in Sudan or how can we explain what we see on TV each night unless we talk about the power of evil in the world and in our lives? It was such forces of evil that drove Jesus and his family out of Bethlehem. It was the forces of evil that led him to be crucified.

It is just because of all the evil and suffering in our world that the story has to move on to Good Friday and Easter because these wicked powers, which continue to be at work in our time, were not able to defeat God's ultimate messenger. They certainly tried on Good Friday on a hill outside of town but on Easter there is the resurrection and the declaration that God has the last word and that evil shall not triumph.

The radio station that I often listen to in the car played lovely Christmas music right through Dec. 25<sup>th</sup>. Then much to my astonishment on the 26<sup>th</sup> it was announced that they were going to continue to play Christmas music until the New Year began! Someone at that station understands that the true message of the season doesn't end on December 25<sup>th</sup>. For the same reason, I always encourage the lighting of the Advent candles after the 25<sup>th</sup>. The tragedy is that far too many people have the attitude "Let's get back to normalcy" and the result is a truncated Christmas. We need to celebrate in the spirit of Isaiah and recount God's gracious deeds in our lives. But we also need to walk with Christ into manhood where he will confront the forces of evil that continue to threaten God's world. Only when we have taken that journey have we plumbed the depths of what it means to be a human being.

Quite surprisingly, a song by Stevie Wonder seems to capture the mood of our two scripture lessons:  
recognizing the bad things

Someday at Christmas men won't be boys  
Playing with bombs like kids play with toys  
One warm December our hearts will see  
A world where men are free.

Someday at Christmas there'll be no wars  
When we have learned what Christmas is for  
When we have found what life's really worth  
There'll be peace on earth.

Someday all our dreams will come to be  
Someday in a world where men are free  
Maybe not in time for you and me  
But someday at Christmastime

Someday at Christmas we'll see a Man  
No hungry children, no empty hand  
One happy morning people will share  
Our world where people care.

Someday at Christmas there'll be no tears  
All men are equal and no men have fears  
One shining moment my heart ran away  
From our world today.

Someday all our dreams will come to be  
Someday in a world where men are free  
Maybe not in time for you and me  
But someday at Christmastime  
Someday at Christmastime.