

The Dark Side of Christmas
Matthew 2: 13-23

The season of Christmas festivity is winding down. The decorations, the parties, the presents in their wrappings...cakes and cookies and candy...the glowing candlelight and familiar carols...Christmas 2007 will soon be fond memory. But, we will try, won't we, to hold onto the vision of a peaceable kingdom offered by the prophet Isaiah? We will try, won't we, to keep alive the hope and promise embodied in the innocent infant Jesus? We will try.

But we also understand that there is a dark side to Christmas. Wherever light shines there is also shadow. This congregation and community certainly have sensed that as the shadow of death crept over us with the passing of Barbara Neill, Dick Helbig, and Judith Anderson in the space of the last five weeks. Our celebration has been tempered by grief.

So it was also when Jesus was born. Today we read the terrible story called "The Massacre of the Innocents." The wise men, having been sent by Herod to find the Christ child – not so that he could worship Jesus but so that he could eliminate him – did not report back to Herod but instead avoided him and went home by another way. And then we read: *When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under...*

This is an appalling consequence of the birth of Jesus that rarely comes to mind at Christmastime. Herod murdered all the innocent children he could find who were two years old or younger just so he could

be assured there would be no rival to his rule in Israel. Herod would snuff out the light of the world before it had a chance to burn too brightly.

The massacre of the innocents is found only in the Gospel of Matthew. All the gospel writers understand that Christ's coming constituted the fulfillment of Scripture, but Matthew especially. That is why, in each of these three scenes, he says *This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet [Hosea], "Out of Egypt I have called my son"* and *Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation..."* and *There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, "He will be called a Nazorean."*

The story of Herod's murdering babies connects with Hebrew scripture also. Easily we can recall the story of Pharaoh murdering infants when he was afraid of the Israelites becoming too numerous and strong. Moses would have been one of those had he not been hidden in that basket of reeds. Jesus would have been killed if Mary and Joseph had not fled with him to Egypt.

And yet Matthew's recounting is more than literary device. Matthew is telling us that Jesus had a price on his head from the day he was born. Jesus knew from the very beginning of his earthly life what it was like to be a homeless refugee, oppressed, hunted by cruel people and driven by fear. The shadow of the cross falls over his life from the start. Matthew's first point is made: **When we experience situations of being beaten upon, or other times of loss and loneliness, we can know that God in Christ Jesus, shares our suffering.**

Extending that idea, we are called upon to be those who give shelter and relief to the refugee who is Jesus.

In the early part of the twentieth century, Dorothy Day founded the Catholic Worker Movement that still ministers among the poor in the name of Christ. Day had little patience with those who claimed that Christ was an historical figure, born 2000 years before us, long ago and far away. “Christ is always with us, always asking for room in our hearts,” she said. “Christ is present, and Christ speaks to us in the faces and the voices of those who are in great need. The Holy Family still needs shelter from the cold. The babe in Bethlehem still needs a protecting hand. In the homeless family, in the refugee, we continue to be confronted by the living present Christ. In giving to those in need, we give to Christ.

It was her deep belief in the reality of the incarnation, that great truth we celebrate at Christmas, that propelled Dorothy Day to do good among the poorest of the poor. In receiving the stranger, in feeding the hungry, we are receiving Christ and also thus worshiping him. (Willimon 67)

Christmas has a dark side alright and Matthew makes sure we see it. The dark side is human suffering; the violence we inflict upon one another; the injustice, abuse and oppression. Where there is light there is also darkness and shadow.

And yet, where there is darkness and shadow there also has to be light. Charles Dickens’ legendary ghost story, *A Christmas Carol*, comes to mind. Interestingly, Dickens wrote this story during a decline in England of old Christmas traditions and his tale helped revive the celebration of the holiday. I think perhaps the real meaning of Christmas as well. *The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light...*

Ebenezer Scrooge was a man of darkness, “a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner...The cold within him froze his old features, nipped his pointed nose, shriveled his cheek, stiffened his gait; made his eyes red, his thin lips blue; and spoke out shrewdly in his grating voice.” Needless to say, he had no time for wishing anyone “Merry Christmas!” “Bah! Humbug,” was his byword for the season.

But one particular Christmas Eve, Scrooge was visited by ghosts – of Christmas Past, Christmas Present and Christmas Future. The spirits led him both back and forward in time to show him frighteningly the horrible human being he was and would become in death. And how different it was for others, like the Cratchit family, even though they were poor, not rich like him.

This Christmas Eve dream shone a light into the darkness of Scrooge’s life, particularly in the visit from the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come.

The Phantom slowly, gravely, silently approached. When it came near him, Scrooge bent down upon his knee; for in the very air through which this Spirit moved it seemed to scatter gloom and mystery.

It was shrouded in a deep black garment, which concealed its head, its face, its form, and left nothing of it visible save one outstretched hand. But for this it would have been difficult to detach its figure from the night, and separate it from the darkness by which it was surrounded.

Eventually, the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come led Scrooge into a church graveyard.

“The Spirit stood among the graves, and pointed down to One. [Scrooge] advanced towards it trembling....

“Before I draw nearer to that stone to which you point,” said Scrooge, “answer me one question. Are these the shadows of the things that Will be, or are they shadows of the things that May be, only?”

Still the Ghost pointed downward to the grave by which it stood.

“Men’s courses will foreshadow certain ends, to which, if persevered in, they must lead,” said Scrooge. “But if the courses be departed from, the ends will change. Say it is thus with what you show me!”

The Spirit was immovable as ever.

Scrooge crept towards it, trembling as he went; and following the finger, read upon the stone of the neglected grave his own name, EBENEZER SCROOGE.

“Am *I* that man who lay upon the bed?” he cried, upon his knees.

The finger pointed from the grave to him, and back again.

“No, Spirit! Oh no, no!”

The finger was still there.

“Spirit!” he cried, tight clutching at its robe, “hear me! I am not the man I was. I will not be the man I must have been but for this intercourse. Why show me this, if I am past all hope?”

For the first time the hand appeared to shake.

“Good Spirit,” he pursued, as down upon the ground he fell before it: “Your nature intercedes for me, and pities me. Assure me that I yet may change these shadows you have shown me, by an altered life!”

The kind hand trembled.

“I will honour Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year. I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future. The Spirits of all Three shall strive within me. I will not shut out the lessons that they teach. Oh, tell me I may sponge away the writing on this stone!”

In his agony, he caught the spectral hand. It sought to free itself, but he was strong in his entreaty, and detained it. The Spirit, stronger yet, repulsed him.

Holding up his hands in one last prayer to have his fate reversed, he saw an alteration in the Phantom’s hood and dress. It shrunk, collapsed and dwindled down into a bedpost.

May God lead us all through darkness, which can seem even darker at Christmas time because of the contrast to the Light of Christ coming into the world. Yet may we realize that the Light of the World does indeed shine for us, driving away all the shadows.

God Bless us, Every One!

Willimon, William H. "Back to Normal" Pulpit Resource 30 Dec. 2007, 65-68.

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