



## 1 CHRISTMAS A07

30 December 2007

Isaiah 63.7-9

Psalms 148

Hebrews 2.10-18

Matthew 2.13-23

What WERE we waiting for?

Silent nights? Holy towns? Peace on earth? Goodwill to all?

This really should come as no surprise, this slaughter of babies—

We WERE forewarned.

As we began our New Year we heard it from Matthew.....

on the first Sunday in Advent:

“As in the days of Noah”...they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away

Two will be in the field and one will be taken and one will be left”

This is the prophecy we heard that day—a cataclysm.

The birth we have been awaiting will bring....not peace and goodwill.....

but danger and strife.

KEEP AWAKE..... were Matthew’s words of warning at the beginning of our Advent wait.

Even as we sat here on Christmas Eve

and sang warm, cozy carols about peace and goodwill

In the glow of candlelight .....

We had already been prepared to understand that it would not last—

we were warned to remain awake and vigilant.

And in Matthew’s gospel it doesn’t take very long

to get to the violent response to Jesus’ birth.

This is only the second chapter of the gospel.

In chapter 1, the writer of Matthew gives us the genealogy,

Then a simple statement of Jesus’ birth,

.....only four words, “WHEN Jesus was born....”

Then the brief story of the magi .....(which, oddly, we hear next week)

and suddenly .....

MURDER .....of all the babies who might....just might....change the political order,

disturb our comfortable way of life.

For in Matthew there are no choirs of angels

Only some pagan *magoi*, wanderers, interpreters of dreams,

Coming to find out what the powers of the earth are doing by this unusual star.

These stories in our Bible were originally oral traditions

shared among the early followers

As they gathered to remember their teacher and Lord Jesus.

These stories were told to encourage one another

in the new way of life their teacher and Lord Jesus had taught.

As they told the stories of Jesus,

They heard them in the context of all the other stories that shaped them as a people

The formative event for the people of Israel,  
the event that defined who they were,  
is an event they remember in story every year—**COMMANDED** by God  
to be told every year at Passover..... the story of the Exodus.  
And so, the writer of Matthew,  
using the storytellers' art of interweaving of ancient story with the events of the day,  
uses Israel's past to tell the future.....

As we listen to this morning's text we hear,  
not only the story of Mary and Joseph and Jesus and their escape from Herod,  
but also the story of another escape....  
when God spoke through angels and delivered a whole people to safety  
with snakes, rivers of blood, frogs, boils and hail, locusts and darkness,  
and the deaths of **OTHER** infants...the firstborn of the Egyptians.....  
then "loud cry" from the Egyptians, the wail of their lamentation,  
for **THEIR** children who were no more.  
As the angel of God led the Israelites through the Red Sea,  
The three refugees this morning  
travel that same desert, where their ancestors had fled from slavery.

The flight of the Holy Family INTO Egypt is a new formative event for God's people,  
The beginning of a **NEW** salvation story.

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**BEING JESUS** is dangerous indeed.  
Even as a tiny baby, he provokes fear and violence—bringing out the evil in our hearts,  
Making us fearful because we do not **KNOW** how our lives will change  
Because of this baby.  
When God assumes human form, it is inevitably .....**LETHAL**.  
No wonder Matthew has warned us to stay awake.....

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Even today tiny, helpless babies continue to threaten the powerful,  
whether they are born in Armenia, Rwanda, Bosnia, or in present-day Bethlehem,  
babies are a **THREAT** to the status quo.  
Even in our own families, even when babies are desired and looked forward to,  
a baby changes everything.  
Power is renegotiated,  
rivalries emerge and lives are dramatically changed.  
Much as we focus on their cuteness,  
babies always **THREATEN** our comfortable way of life.

Even now, Palestinian babies born in Bethlehem threaten the status quo in Israel.  
What will happen if all these new Palestinians are allowed to **VOTE** in Israeli elections?  
Their numbers are so great that they will change the balance of power.  
If given the vote, these Palestinian babies threaten the present way of life—  
The safety of Israeli schoolchildren is at risk;  
the very State of Israel itself is at risk.

And so, at this moment, as we sit here in church,  
refugees wait to make the dangerous journey  
Through the desert, from Bethlehem to Egypt,  
Fleeing death at the hands of the powerful.  
And, as it was for Joseph, Mary and Jesus,  
it is still a dangerous, life-threatening journey.

At this very moment, they are lined up in the late afternoon sun,  
Low in the sky and cooler in winter than in the blistering heat of August.  
Today, as in Jesus' time, the route between Israel and Egypt is along the coast,

through the BORDER CROSSING at Rafah,  
between the Gaza Strip and Egypt.

As in Jesus' time, it is still no quick, or easy trip.  
In Rafah, during the first 9 months of 2007, 35 people died simply waiting at the border,  
closed for months by Israeli soldiers.....  
Under the hot sun of August,  
a 27-year-old Palestinian mother died on the Egyptian side of the border,  
As she waited to return to Gaza after her surgery in Egypt.  
She died waiting for the border to open.  
She died waiting to see her children in Gaza.

On the Israeli side, too, they wait...  
To travel to Egypt for operations for cancer, kidney diseases and other chronic illnesses  
which cannot be treated in under-equipped Palestinian hospitals.  
A bride waits for months, her trousseau in her suitcase at her side,  
to join her fiancé in the United Arab Emirates.

It is estimated that 12,000 Palestinians are stranded on the Egyptian side, waiting to enter.  
Several thousand more are trapped on the Gaza side, waiting to leave.  
They sell their clothing, watches and personal belongings  
to purchase food and water as they wait.  
The fuel needed to run the water pumps in Gaza City is also halted at the border,  
Making the water unsafe to drink.  
In November and December, 31 patients died in Gaza,  
Waiting to travel to hospitals in Egypt, Jordan, the West Bank or Israel.

The Holy Family's journey  
Reminds us of the longest and largest of all refugee problems in the world today,  
the Palestine refugees, who have waited 57 years,  
since a UN resolution expelled some 750,000-900,000 people  
from Palestine.  
A subsequent Resolution in December 1948,  
stating that those 'refugees wishing to return to their homes  
and live in peace with their neighbours  
should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date,  
and that compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return  
and for loss or damage to property,'  
was never implemented.

Most of the villages of these Arab refugees were bulldozed,  
so these people and their descendants remain in the refugee camps.

The on-going construction of a barrier between Israel and the occupied West Bank  
is creating a new generation of Palestinian refugees  
and a new generation of terrorists, bent on changing the power dynamic,  
by killing more of Rachel's children on their school buses and in shopping malls,  
and WE again HEAR RACHEL, weeping for her children—Palestinian and Israeli—  
in the stories of suicide bombers on our nightly news.

The god who flees in terror from the tyrants of the world.  
KNOWS our sorrow over our lost children.  
Our god is revealed as a god of refugees  
and all who are victims of violence and injustice.

As Joseph protected and cared for Jesus and Mary  
We are, too, are called to listen for the word from God that would direct OUR lives  
And show US where WE should go, to protect the "little ones,"  
Those who are persecuted and helpless under the sword of tyrannical rulers,  
Or threatened daily by terrorists.

How IS God speaking to us today?  
As we hear of the assassination in Pakistan,  
Arrests and torture of political dissidents?  
What is God calling YOU to do as the Herods of our OUR world seek to kill the innocent?  
Who are the “little ones” of God among us today?  
And how are we being called to protect them?

Just as Matthew’s narrative looks back to the Exodus  
It also looks FORWARD..... to what is to come.  
We are ominously reminded  
that “Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod.”

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The drama is not over;  
there is no happily ever after in our story.  
There are other Herods who will continue their tyranny.  
Herod’s reaction to the baby in Bethlehem  
is not so different from that of those who crucified him,.....  
Or from our OWN reaction to Jesus’ message of justice-making,  
That, if lived out in earnest, might alter OUR comfortable way of life—  
making oil more expensive for our cars, or opening our borders to possible terrorists  
or diminishing our standard of living.

The story of the flight into Egypt tells us  
that Jesus was accepted and tenderly cared for by those on the OUTSIDE—  
The strange *magoi* “from the east”—exotic men who interpret dreams,.....  
GENTILES, no less,..... pagans, *goyim*.  
AND by lowly Joseph, surely befuddled by all that is happening,  
.....But NEVER WAVERING,  
faithfully following whatever odd ideas the angelic messengers have for him.....

Marrying his betrothed, even though it will mean humiliation and embarrassment,  
Giving up even his patriarchal right to claim and name this child,  
which he will raise, but which will NOT be his.  
Matthew never refers to Joseph as Jesus’ father.  
Joseph faithfully listens and carries out whatever WACKY plan  
the angelic messengers concoct..... for him and his family.

This is certainly not what we expected, but  
Instead we learn something SURPRISING about our mysterious god.....  
AND about ourselves.  
We learn that our god CHOSE.....  
not only to become human, but to be vulnerable.....,  
To TRUST US ENOUGH to care for him.  
As he says through Isaiah’s words,  
“surely they are my people, children who will not deal falsely”

What kind of a God looks at US—  
HERODS,..... preoccupied with OUR OWN safety and well-being—  
And still utters these words of trust?  
What kind of god could trust us enough  
to come among us as the most helpless of creatures?

.....It is God, simply showing us WHO WE ARE—faithful Josephs who LISTEN and ACT,  
Who HEAR the promise and FOLLOW where it leads.  
Although, like Herod, we are preoccupied with our own safety and comfort,  
God nevertheless trusts us to be our TRUE SELVES, the selves we were CREATED to be.

God is doing something new here, continuing the process of creation,

Taking up our past and making new possibilities from suffering and death.  
God's promises and grace precede all our human action,  
The miracle here is not simply a fatherless birth or a safe passage through the desert,  
But that God called forth from Joseph  
and continues to call forth from us, **MIRACULOUS FAITHFULNESS AND TRUST.**  
Leading us into new and dangerous terrain, risking our safety and well-being  
For the sake of the weak and vulnerable.  
In the simple trust of an infant, God shows us who we are—  
The protectors of the weak, the "little ones"  
Who still wait at border crossings, bags packed and hoping for safe passage.