

Matthew 2:13-23

Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.' Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.'

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, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

'A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.'

When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead.' Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, 'He will be called a Nazorean.'

Why We Can Never Leave Christmas Behind Us

So how do you feel now that Christmas is over? Relieved or a little sad or both? I don't miss the shopping, the cooking and cleaning, or all the decorating, but I do miss the celebrations and parties and the gift exchanging. I'm not looking forward to un-decorating the tree and carrying it back down to the basement.

Today's scripture passage should certainly make us miss Christmas; we've moved from "Glory to God in the highest, peace on earth, good will to all people" to the slaughter of the innocents. The shepherds in our nativity scene have gone back to their jobs, the magi are on their way back "east," and Mary and Joseph have wrapped up Baby Jesus and run for their lives. No angels for awhile. No heavenly host. All the good news and glad tidings are postponed until Jesus has risen from the dead. Maybe that's why fewer folks are interested in attending church in the months between Christmas and Easter.

So I challenge you today to keep Christmas alive, not just until Easter but throughout the year...throughout your life; keep that joy and peace of Christmas within you every day. If it helps, keep the tree up, leave the lights on, sing Christmas carols, bake another batch of Christmas cookies, send out Christmas cards, and go around wishing people a Merry Christmas. People will think you're a little off balance, but in a good way. The truth is, though, that you don't need the decorations and the presents and the cookies and the carols to keep Christmas alive inside of you. In fact all of the decorations and the cookies and the carols are all expressions of the Christmas spirit that dwells within us, a spirit that doesn't depend on all the outer expressions of the holiday season. The Spirit of Christmas instead depends upon our understanding of what Christmas is all about to begin with, that is **GOD'S ACTUAL PRESENCE WITH US.**

And that word "actual" is important. "Actual" means existing in fact, not just imagination, and not just opinion. God's actual presence means that we grasp that presence in a very real way, that we don't just speculate or imagine something that may or may not be true. A lot of people believe in a god who they would say is a higher power, and many of those who believes in a higher power believes that such a power is present in some way, but how well do they know that higher power? How do they experience this higher power? Some people describe this higher power as they might describe electricity, as a force or power that is capable of doing great things, doing supernatural things, but is this higher power a person or a force? Can I have a personal relationship with this higher power? I can't imagine having a relationship with electricity. In Star Wars movies, there is something called "The Force" which seems to work toward some peace and harmony among all creatures, but that force is enigmatic; it's a "thing" that seems to be harnessed much like electricity, but is this force something like a god? There are plenty of "spiritual" people who tell you about what they believe God is and what God does, and a lot of their beliefs are no different from a Christian's beliefs. But our beliefs about God go well beyond the beliefs of many a spiritual person, because our Christian beliefs are not just based on our feelings or our imaginations. **OUR BELIEFS ARE BASED ON A PERSON NAMED JESUS, A REAL PERSON, AN ACTUAL PERSON WHO LIVED, DIED, AND WAS RESURRECTED.** And what we know about that person shapes our lives. I must confess that knowing Jesus is a real challenge, because our written sources are limited and diverse, which is the reason that the Church in this world is so divided, **BUT IT IS OUR FOCUS ON JESUS THAT MAKES US CHRISTIANS.** And Christmas is the time that we celebrate the birth of that person, Jesus the Christ, the anointed Son of God. And because Jesus is so important to us, Christmas is also important to us.

Because we believe Jesus to be the anointed Son of God, the Christmas story gives us important insight into God, insight into ourselves, and insight into how our lives need to be lived.

What does Christmas tell us about God? Well, first of all God wants us to identify him in human flesh, and not just any flesh but common flesh – common people like Mary and Joseph who were just poor Jews trying to make living, trying to find a warm place for their child to be born, and later, as today’s lesson describes, trying to keep that child alive when his life is threatened by rulers and principalities of this world. God identifies with the weak and the vulnerable, those who struggle to get by, and those who need help just to get by. Frankly there are a lot of very “religious” people who claim to love God but couldn’t give a hoot about their fellow human being. We can think of plenty of examples of people past and present who claim to have a love for God who have no qualms about torturing or killing their fellow human being.. There are Christians who claim to love Jesus but have no great compassion for the people sitting next to them. By coming to us in human form, God is *sanctifying* humanity. He’s begging us to stop making some distinction between the way we feel about God and the way we feel about one another. Can we really love God and not love one another? Jesus reminds us in Matthew’s gospel that when we do something for or against our fellow human being we do it for or against him, and if he is indeed divine flesh then we are acting against God himself. Christmas is about God coming in the flesh and in the weakest and most vulnerable flesh available.

So what else does Christmas tell us about us? It tells us that we are people worth saving. Why? Because God created us in his image. And where do we see the most beautiful attributes of humanity? In the Christmas story! Mary and Joseph would both face struggles and hardships just bringing their child into the world, but what parents don’t make sacrifices in order to start a family? Mary and Joseph would have to leave their home, their friends, and their families and move to a foreign land to keep their child safe from enemies, yet what mother or father has not made extraordinary efforts at times to protect their child? What grandparent hasn’t gone out on a limb to help their grandchildren grow up in a safe and healthy environment? Are we not like Mary and Joseph? Can we see that goodness in us? God certainly does! When God created the world he said it was good; when he created humanity he said it was VERY good. At Christmas we can see the best in ourselves as more people put their own interests aside to help the poor, the weak, the downtrodden, the abandoned. Jesus will later demonstrate God’s immense love for us by dying on a cross, but at Christmas God shows us *our* potential to demonstrate immense love and immense sacrifice for a child.

And while we may puzzle over why God did not put some force field around Jesus to protect him, why he entrusted the life of his Son to a carpenter and his wife, the Christmas story tells us one more thing about God; God is not interested in fixing our problems for us; God wants to work with us, because he understands that our joy comes from our own industry as we labor in love for one another. We all have great gifts and great potential, and God has given each of us a mission in this world and in this life, and our joy depends upon our will to live up to our potential, to give ourselves completely to service to God and his creation. And we know that the least satisfied people in this world, the least joyful people are the ones whose lives revolve only around themselves, people like Ebenezer Scrooge – too many people live lives like Ebenezer Scrooge, and the best thing that could happen to them would be to meet the ghosts of Christmas past, present, and future. The truth is that for us to keep our joy, to keep our peace, we have to keep Christmas in our hearts. We have to remember who God is, why he came to us as he did, and how the whole story speaks to us, tells us who we are and how we relate to God. To forget Christmas is to forget who God is and who we are. To leave Christmas behind us is to leave joy and peace behind us.

And our joy and our peace can only be complete when we share Christ with others, when we can share with others what a great thing God has done for us and through us and with us.