

This Little Child

A Sermon Preached by Lee Cheek, Licensed Lay Preacher

Grace Church, An Episcopal Community in the Southern Berkshires (Great Barrington, MA)

Christmas 2B, January 4, 2015

Matthew 2: 13-15, 19-23

*O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by;
yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting Light;
the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.¹*

Today's reading is a chopped up snippet of Matthew's infancy narrative, that I would like to fill out a bit, before we can get to what it might mean for us. It is part of the Epiphany story, and also a part of the reading for the Feast of the Holy Innocents, whom the Church honors as martyrs on December 28.

According to Matthew, King Herod "*became frightened, and all Jerusalem with him,*" when he heard that three magi from the east were asking about the child who had been born to be King of the Jews. Reminded of the prophecy from Micah about the ruler from Bethlehem who would become a shepherd to the people, Herod sends the magi to Bethlehem with orders to bring him news. They visit the holy family and return home by another way, unwittingly setting the stage for the next turn of events.

You'll notice that today's reading also leaves out verses 16-17, where we learn of the tragedy they had not foreseen:

*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." [Jer 31.15]*

Matthew tells us that the Magi take a different way home, and about 20 or 30 male babies of Bethlehem are slaughtered so that Herod can feel unrivaled by the next "King of the Jews".

While he was a brilliant soldier and skillful politician, King Herod is an arch typical tyrant who operated under the Roman imperial theology which promised "peace through political conquest." Even members of Herod's own family were not safe. He had three of his sons and one of his ten wives murdered to remove any threat to his throne.

This is not something we want to think about. Theologian Stanley Hauerwas tells us in his commentary on Matthew that,

"Perhaps no event in the gospel more determinatively challenges the sentimental depiction of Christmas, than the death of these children. Jesus is born into a world in which children are killed, and continue to be killed, to protect the power of tyrants."²

Indeed. And I believe there is no other story in the birth narratives of Jesus that shocks us into the most profound and deep meaning of Christmas than this chapter of Matthew. For Matthew is telling us something very important about the way human beings act when we are afraid of losing something and we have the weapons to do something about it.

*yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting Light;
the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.*

The deep message of Christmas is that in the darkness, there IS a light—a hope of salvation from our violent ways of trying to solve our conflicts. And there is an answer to our fears that more and more children will suffer and die under the swords of contemporary Herods.

UNICEF declared 2014 a DEVASTATING year for children, with 230 million children living in countries, affected by armed conflict. 15 million live in regions of major conflicts.³ Imagine the effect of traumatic stress on their nervous systems. Imagine the humiliations that erode dignity and self-identity. Imagine their souls.

Why does Matthew insist on this story? If the world is in such a mess, why does God come as a baby, and not a warrior-King who can rid us of a Herod, a Caesar, and all evil-doers? ⁴

It's helpful to remember that Matthew is writing with what James Alison calls "Easter-fied eyes."⁵ The accounts of the beginnings of great lives can only be imagined, for they are only written up because of what happened *later* in that person's life.

Matthew had been present for the last three years of Jesus' life, from the beginning to the end of his ministry on earth. But he had *also* been witness to the *risen* Christ, and had the unmistakable experience of being absolutely loved and forgiven. At that moment, he received The Message:

"Love's Project has begun, Matthew, and you will tell the story so that it will enter into their hearts just as I--and my Love for you--has entered into yours."

Yes, of course. Love is smuggled in as a baby! We won't be expecting that. Love, like a baby, is always vulnerable, never forceful, never pushy, even in a world of violence, indifference, and rejection.

The vulnerability of Divine Love entered into the world through an earthly portal into a town called Bethlehem, just as the prophet Micah foretold. And this time, Bethlehem received a different king—the King of Love.

Our hearts are quite *like* Bethlehems, don't you think, for our hearts are exactly where our hopes and fears meet. Can you imagine right now a little child gently dropping through the earthly portal of your heart, finding there a soft place to land? Making you vulnerable to the suffering of all. Helping you see a rival as a fellow human being who may yet become a friend.

Matthew learned from Jesus that the God of Love is not an interventionist god who waves a wand and makes the world a better place. Matthew is showing us *Emmanuel*, God-who-is-with-us in a violent and broken world. Matthew is showing us that the Savior of the World *must* come to us as a little child, for a little child has the best chance—though the riskiest—of entering the hardest of hearts.

Do you think this is sentimental hokey—that Non-violent Love can overcome the misery of atrocities, oppression, and torture? Our faith in God-With-Us tells me it's the only *real* chance we have of surviving endless cycles of violence. The good news is that even though there is so much conflict to be overcome and healed, there has been a good number of over-comings and healings of hardened hearts in this old world. Let me tell you a very recent story of one.

I'm going to tell the ending of the story first because you know it. And like all good endings, it is really the beginning of something new, unexpected, and on-goingly creative. On December 17 President Obama announced a breakthrough, after nearly six decades, in the restoration of relations between the United States and Cuba. You may also know that Pope Francis was instrumental in sealing the deal in the last months of the negotiations.

You may not know that the Pope's involvement was facilitated by Beyond Conflict,⁶ a Cambridge, Massachusetts-based non-profit which has worked on conflict reconciliation around the globe since 1992, in Kosovo, Bosnia, Northern Ireland, South Africa, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Chile among others. Beyond Conflict facilitates meetings between groups in conflict by introducing them to teams of former adversaries who have successfully managed the transition from conflict to peace.

Though there is no mention of Christ or God in their publications or website, one cannot mistake the movement of the Spirit in the stunning and surprising details in their stories, of how violence has ended, enmities have diminished, and relationships have transformed. The hard work of learning to see other human

beings as humans, and not as demons or beasts, is the work of the Gospel and it is the core of their work, as well as ours.

And that brings me to how a vulnerable child entered a man's heart and jump-started this astonishing turn of events. Five years ago, Carlos Rodriguez, a staunch anti-Castro, Cuban-American businessman, approached Beyond Conflict, and said that he wanted to help the Cuban people and stop fighting old wars.

On December 18, Tim Phillips, co-founder of Beyond Conflict, related Rodriguez's story on WBUR's radio program *Here and Now*.⁷ When Rodriguez was 6 years old, he fled Cuba and arrived in the United States with both of his parents. Some years later, in 1999, he became greatly affected by the story of another Cuban boy, Elian Gonzalez, who was just 2 months short of his 6th birthday. Elian arrived in Florida, on a raft, with only one parent—a mother who had died on the way. His legal status was contested for over 6 months and Elian was the subject of much publicity and unrest until he was re-united with his father in Cuba.

Elian's plight had been softening Rodriguez's heart for 10 years when he finally reached out to the Cambridge group. Thus began the five years of intense meetings with Cuban-Americans and Cubans, in the U.S., Canada, Cuba, Ireland, and the Vatican. They explored deep divisions and pain, and for the Cuban-Americans, the fear of betraying their parents and grand-parents.

Nelson Mandela and other representatives from South Africa and Northern Ireland were brought in to walk them through the hard places. A break-through at the upper levels of leadership occurred when a chain of contacts in Boston reached Pope Francis, and he participated in the last year and a half of negotiations.⁸

And it began with a vulnerable little child whose story entered a man's heart and changed it.

As in ancient times, there are deep divisions in the world today. It is not news that power and wealth are gained by manipulating these divisions with the violence of rhetoric and physical force.

But the Good News is that the joyful, tender, saving work of the Christ-child began on earth, in a dark street of Bethlehem some 2000 years ago. And the *really* Good News is that this tender, saving work is continuing in the earthly portals of our hearts, where we meet a joy that is stronger than death: the LOVE for US that becomes LOVE for OTHERS.

*O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray;
cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel.*

¹ Phillips Brooks, Episcopal priest and bishop, wrote this carol in 1868 for his Sunday school class.

http://www.hymnary.org/text/o_little_town_of_bethlehem

² Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006), p.41

³ <http://www.reuters.com/video/2014/12/22/un-children-maimed-raped-tortured-killed?videoid=351338327>

⁴ Of course, this would include everyone. Adam Ericson of the Raven Foundation has an essay about becoming less violent

<http://www.ravenfoundation.org/top-5-ways-peaceful-2015/>

⁵ James Alison, "Looking backwards for Christmas," *Church Times*, London, No. 7244, 2001. Available from

<http://www.jamesalison.co.uk/pdf/eng24.pdf>

⁶ <http://www.beyondconflictint.org/>

⁷ <http://hereandnow.wbur.org/2014/12/18/beyond-conflict-cuba>

⁸ <http://www.cruxnow.com/church/2014/12/17/pope-francis-helped-broker-the-restoration-of-us-cuban-relations/>

In addition to the above sources, the preacher gives thanks to the following authors who helped inform her thinking and prayer:

Michael Hardin, see <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/christianityischanging/2014/12/the-death-of-innocentsinnocence/>, and

<http://www.preachingpeace.org/>; Rich Simpson, see <http://rmsimpson.blogspot.com/2014/12/holy-innocents.html>