

The Other Story of Christmas

Isaiah 63: 7-14

Matthew 2: 1-23

The Christmas story is all Luke's. No other gospel has those elements of the birth of Jesus. Matthew covers the whole event in the last verse of chapter one. Luke's version is a wonderful story that yields surprises and delights. There are enough details within it as well as enough details omitted to allow the mind and imagination of the listener to develop a vision for the strange and exciting events around the Lord's birth.

We like Luke's story with its pastoral imagery, pleasant surprises, simple spirits, and it offers the opportunity to embellish and adapt. The manger scene has gotten very crowded as we add in cows and horsies, lambies and piggies, chickens and dummies, all looking adoringly at the baby. *This* is the way we expect to experience the Christmas story.

The story of Jesus' birth in Matthew is wholly different. Matthew focuses almost entirely on what happens just after Jesus is born. The preference among the faithful is to cut off the Matthew account once the three magi depart because what comes afterwards is an ugly, dark account of persecution and brutality.

The story in Matthew acts as a counterpoint to the sweet, mystical story portrayed in Luke, the *yang* to the *yin*. The brutal real-world nature of Matthew's story is as disturbing as Luke's version is comforting.

Indeed, Matthew's tale of danger and intrigue is key to understanding what Christmas and the incarnation really mean outside the commercial, sentimental, celebration of celebrating, and frankly bizarre practices of contemporary Christmas Christians. In fact, it is the occasion revealing of the Promised One of God who brings God's revolutionary Kingdom to the world. It presages the terrible events at the end of Jesus' earthly life with ominous themes surrounding his birth. In Matthew, the birth of the Promised One of God is not greeted with glad songs and joyful celebration, but as a threat to the powers-that-be, and *that* is how it should be, stripped of the gloss that has thoroughly masked God's bold Kingdom announcement.

The last century of human history has seen horrible brutality on an unthinkable scale. When it has occurred, no justification is sufficient and no explanation is adequate. It is simply the brute exercise of the power of death to achieve a desired goal. It is the tool of tyrants who have no regard for anything but their own power, and who will use the most evil and unjust tactics to achieve their desired end. They seek to incarnate fear and terror in order to oppress and dominate, eliminating any threat however small or minor, and using savage violence as a deterrent to any who harbor the thought of real justice or righteousness.

God works in opposite fashion through Jesus. God incarnates love in order to empower and unify, challenging agendas of injustice and unrighteousness. But as God acts to bring a new order and a new way into the world, it comes into immediate conflict

with worldly powers and authorities who only want their agenda secured. These worldly powers will act with vicious resolve to maintain their standing. Threat and death color Matthew's account.

The naïve magi or wise men from the east actually go to the king of the Jews, Herod, and ask, 'where has the king of the Jews has been born?' That wasn't the smartest move. Insecure kings, like Herod, don't want to hear that their *successor* is at hand and being sought by strange travelers.

Herod tries to co-opt the magi's naivete for his own purposes. 'Let these saps do my bidding and find this new "king" for me in the pretext of my desire to be devout and faithful. By the time they realize what they've done, it will be too late. My goal will have been accomplished.'

The magi are not Jews, but Gentiles, journeying from another land. God inspired them to seek out the new and wonderful thing God is doing in the world. Matthew's introduction of God-seeking *Gentiles* in the earliest phase of the birth of Jesus serves notice that this Promised One of God is **not** simply for the Jews, but God's Kingdom servant who will be sought by those seeking truth and wisdom from far corners of the world.

The magi head to Bethlehem, led by a star that points the way and identifies the place where the new family is residing. The magi are examples of those *faithful* to God's calling, following the light and path that God has set before them. Although fraught with dangers, the magi proceed *obediently*. (By the way, note how the Jewish religious leaders, the priests and scribes, stay behind in Jerusalem as the magi continue to Bethlehem. Are these religious leaders uninterested, or are they fearful since Herod is visibly upset? Regardless, they play it safe and stay home.)

When the magi arrive, their expensive gifts provoke a listener's imagination and symbolic understandings pile on. These generous gifts are truly appropriate to a king, and yet they're offered to a humble family to honor their child at its birth. In general, it fulfills the prophecies that say something like, 'the nations of the world will come, bringing riches and treasures to praise and honor God's chosen king.'

Having faithfully fulfilled their mission, now God intervenes to alert the magi to the scheming of Herod. Again, these Gentiles maintain faithfulness to God, obediently avoiding Herod and Jerusalem on their return trip. And this is where the story's telling often ends because now the ugliness begins.

As the story continues, God again intervenes, warning Joseph in a dream to flee the coming violence and seek sanctuary in Egypt since Herod seeks to kill their child. Joseph, too, is obedient to God's command and does as he's told, fleeing Herod's coming persecution.

Perhaps Herod trusted too fully in his own scheming and expected the magi's naivete to continue unchanged. In any event, Herod's soldiers arrive in Bethlehem too

late. The magi are gone and the whereabouts of this holy family and its child-king is unknown. Furious, Herod demands the slaughter of every male child under 2 years old in the region around Bethlehem. It is no coincidence that a dramatic saving of a baby from a murderous imperial decree appears both here *and* in the story of Moses.

While there is no historical record of this particular slaughter, it is fully in line with Herod's record of ruthlessness in other purges and persecutions in order to silence potential opponents and cow the populace into submission with terrorizing death squads. Only Romans could conduct formal executions, but Herod's death squads were another matter.

Then the story forwards to the death of Herod and the divine message again comes to Joseph in Egypt that it's now time to return. But Herod's designated heir Archelaus wastes no time in establishing his reputation, carrying out a brutal massacre right after his father's funeral. Archelaus was totally incompetent. Never granted the title of "king" by Caesar Augustus, Archelaus was tolerated for 10 years before being banished. It was obvious that Archelaus was picking up where his father left off, so the holy family journeys from Bethlehem outside Jerusalem to the more remote and relatively safer region of Galilee, a place known for both sanctuary and rebellion.

What we see in Matthew's account is the violent resistance of the powers of empire to the initiative of God. Matthew juxtaposes the life-giving work of God with the death-bringing work of worldly powers.

Matthew isn't considering ethical implications in God's saving one child in one family while leaving the rest unaware and doomed to the death squads. In the beginning of the life of Jesus, there are innocent ones being killed for no good reason, without justification except for the ambitions of power and authority of the ungodly. Again, it recalls Pharaoh's persecution of the Hebrew babies as well as the death of Egyptian children at the Passover. This slaughter of the innocents in Bethlehem serves as a reflection or a harbinger of the end of Jesus' earthly story in the state-sponsored death of Jesus, *God's* innocent One.

In all instances, God's salvation is ever continuing, despite the vain and futile attempts of worldly powers to thwart God's work for life. As the holy family escapes the death squads, God's work of salvation continues for all humanity. As Jesus dies on the cross, God's work of salvation continues for all humanity, and is fulfilled in the resurrection.

The passage from Isaiah recounts the story of God's love and the rebellion of the people he had called to be his own. There has been a season of pain and punishment as God's people experience the absence of God's grace and favor, even though they have returned from exile in Babylon. But that hard season eventually gets people's attention. They come to remember the God who favored their ancestors and delivered them from bondage, and how greatly they were blessed. They begin to seek anew for themselves, "Where is he who brought them through the sea? ... Where is he who set his Holy Spirit

among them?” Those had been liberating times, abundant times, times of blessing by the Spirit of the Lord.

The people of God came to realize that it was *they* who had neglected the covenant, and it was *they* who had to seek God’s promise for their restoration. As they committed themselves anew to God’s promise, God graciously met them with blessing and favor once again. God’s work of salvation could not be thwarted by their efforts – *delayed* but not thwarted.

God’s faithful are hopefully able to recognize and be thankful for the promise of God in Jesus Christ. There are difficult seasons we all have faced and will face in the future. But God’s work proceeds, and as God’s people remain faithful, that work proceeds through them and for them with rich blessings at every turn.

It seems like those difficult seasons are always bringing us to halftime. You’ve seen it. An otherwise good football team can’t seem to do what it needs to do throughout the first half. A lopsided halftime score becomes the source for discouragement. But something can happen when the team gathers off the field, gains some perspective, orients itself in the right direction, and focuses on its goals. It’s like an entirely different team takes the field to dominate the second half. I think God does some creative things to the game clock, but it seems we’re always coming to halftime because God is always ready to work through us in any season that we seek him and commit ourselves to focusing on his work with us and in the world. Can we get on the same page as Jesus and bring forth justice, grace, love, and peace in our lives, in our society?

This yields the true question of the season. As we discover Jesus incarnate among us in this season, can Jesus be incarnate **in us** as Jesus taught us? The powers of the world are not concerned today as Herod was. The worldly powers have our allegiance and Jesus’ followers today are no threat to them. When that changes, *then* the Kingdom will be advancing.

In this season of seeking to discover the gift of the Promised One, may we be newly inspired, focused on sacred goals – God’s goals – re-committing ourselves to faithfulness to our calling as servants, obedient to our Lord and Savior Jesus.