

United Church of Christ in Keene, NH  
Ann Plumley  
Epiphany Sunday: January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2008  
Matthew, Chapter 2

Please pray with me: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.  
Amen.

Little wonder why I chose to dismiss the children after the first scripture reading and children's story, rather than to ask them to listen to this second scripture lesson! It's not one we focus on, typically. Feminist theologian Phyllis Trible refers to texts like this one as, "Texts of Terror", an apt categorization, I think. I think of this story whenever I hear people say that the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament is too violent. They prefer not to read it, thinking that the New Testament is filled only with love and doves; peace on earth, goodwill towards all people.

Not really.

Baby Jesus didn't even graduate to Pull-Ups before there was bloodshed in his name, in his hometown.

Matthew, assembling and writing this Gospel from the perspective of the year 80 or 90 CE, *knows* the ending of the story: he writes *this* story knowing that Christ was crucified by the powers of the empire, in collusion with priests like those that served Herod's court.

I'd just as soon skip this story, you know.

I'm ok with the Christmas cards that show the Holy Family with pyramids in the background, though. In seminary, where your head gets filled with all manner of stuff, I've learned about the parallels that Matthew was drawing here:

- Israel, led by the prophet Joseph sought refuge in Egypt, as does Jesus, raised by his earthly father, Joseph;
- Israel is tested in the wilderness for 40 years, Jesus is tempted in the wilderness for 40 days;
- Israel is brought into new life in the promised land through the Red Sea, Jesus is brought into a ministry of new life through baptism...

Still, what about the dead Hebrew babies? Are they merely the counterpart to all the dead Egyptian boys that persuaded Pharaoh to let Moses' people go?

Though foreign astrologers had made their way to Bethlehem to pay homage, is this a way to say that Mary and Joseph's neighbors' children *deserved* to die because they didn't recognize Jesus as king yet?

It doesn't help me much to learn that there is no historical record of this event, no independent corroboration of Matthew's story. Luke doesn't mention it. Neither does Josephus – the most comprehensive historian writing roughly contemporaneously with Matthew. Not that *any* reference to Herod asserts he's a nice guy. He kills several of his sons and two of his wives, so making the leap to infanticide is not difficult. We could believe *this* of Herod.

But why does Matthew put this nauseating story into his text?

T. S. Eliot, in the poem "The Journey of the Magi" reflects through the voice of one of the magi, writing:

All this was a long time ago, I remember,  
And I would do it again, but set down  
This set down  
This: were we led all that way for  
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,  
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,  
But had thought they were different: this Birth was  
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.  
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,  
But no long at ease here, in the old dispensation,  
With an alien people clutching their gods.  
I should be glad of another death.

"Were we led all (this) way for birth or death?" Have we been led all the way through Advent only to find death in Christmastide?

At the end of this Gospel, Matthew in effect bookends the stories of Jesus birth and death, encompassing them both with the violent exercise of imperial power against innocent people: starting with babies, ending with Jesus.

Have we been led all the way through Advent to remain comfortable with our old dispensations; to be comforted as we clutch our familiar gods? <sup>1</sup>

In one view of today's gospel, the blood of a bunch of babies is a pittance to protect Jesus for a time – so that his blood might be shed for even bigger stakes. This is just the first "spill" on the way to persuade the Hebrew people that they are enslaved to temple cults and oppressive empires, and need liberation

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<sup>1</sup> The poem, and some of the preceding thoughts come from a sermon preached by the Rev. Daniel A. Smith. I've lost the title and date.

(Myself, I think they already knew *that*. And I *don't* ascribe to what is called blood atonement theology)

Can we pass biblical violence off as an historic anachronism, not relevant to today? Like other oddities that no longer apply, like prohibitions against trimming beards or decorating flesh; requirements to marry widowed relations; observing the Sabbath...

Maybe you place yourself among those who think that because the Bible has been used to authorize all sorts of appalling atrocities, the only thing to do it strip its offensive passages out... And in fact, this is sort of what the Lectionary readings often do... And even if a "text of terror" makes it into the Lectionary list, that very Lectionary gives preachers like Gordon and me 3 or 4 or other scripture passages from which to choose, so it's always pretty easy to choose one that's "less gore and more grace." If not for our own lack of courage, then because we are persuaded that Christ's non-violent message of love is the message our congregations and our world most need to hear.<sup>2</sup> (Mary Luti)

How tempting it is to just skip right over this story and get on to Epiphany. Who wants to listen to Rachel crying or see the dead babies?

This gospel story is a haunting one and we would rather not be haunted by it or its echoes in our contemporary life. Still the question: What does a Gospel reading such as this demand of us?

Are we to learn again what Leo Tolstoy observes, that "A good portion of the evils that afflict humankind is due to the erroneous belief that life can be made secure by violence."

That's a political interpretation. And, because the Bible is an intensely political book, so is our faith. And Tolstoy's observations has faith implications... for instance, as the political rhetoric works to frenzy in the next days and weeks and months, Christians might do well to ask: is this person's platform promising idolatrous security in things – people, policies, weapons – that cannot *ever* give the peace that comes from God? Or, is a candidate presented in a way that's blasphemous? That is, as a savior and perfect solution to all this country, world, time needs?

"T.S. Eliot's wise man seems especially wise to ask, "Did we come all this way for birth or death?"

As we listen to the story of the Birth of Christ, as we hear again the story of the Magi bearing gifts, brought to life in the fragrant and colorful special communion bread we will share in a few moments.

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<sup>2</sup> This paragraph comes from one of a sermon series by the Rev. Dr. J. Mary Luti called, *Things we don't talk about in church: Violence*.

We are invited to remember for ourselves the transformation which God gifts to us. To know the new life that God promises us is to know birth and death. Our death. And not merely a psychological or spiritual kind of death. It is only through an encounter with our own mortality and with our limits as human beings that we can come to learn that our lives and our deaths are so much more than opposing beginning and end points.

The transformation that starts with the Christ-child, sets our feet on a journey that knows no end, one that follows the arc of Jesus' life from his birth and baptism, through his ministry, to the foot of the cross and to the empty tomb.

Lest we return too quickly to our old dispensations (and to thinking that birth and death are different; that commerce and political power are salvific) our faith reminds us that the new life to which God calls us is life eternal.

Nowhere does the Bible promise that God will protect us from suffering and death. God offers no such security or protection in this life. With Christ, human beings will suffer and die. With Christ, we come to know that we are *not* in control, that we are *not* invulnerable, that our only power is in our weakness and that our only richness is in God. And yet, we perpetually prefer to return to our Kingdoms where we cling to our riches and where bumper stickers say, "Have No Fear". We live in a country where our rulers arrogantly promise us security, as if we are somehow entitled to live our lives *without* fear of death. As if we buy into the old dispensation thinking that our lives are no more than what happens in the narrow parenthesis between being born and dying.<sup>3</sup>

Receive *this* assurance: In God, the *worst* thing is never the *last* thing. In God, there is more to life than our lives. There is more to death than our deaths. For what will separates us from the love of God in Christ? Nothing. At the end of Matthew's story, in Jesus' post-resurrection commission of his disciples, Matthew quotes Jesus saying: "Lo, I am with you always, until the end of the age." (Mt: 28:20b). *This* is the final word against the forces of culture, assumption and power based in fear.

*This* is the basis for an entirely new and different way of seeing and living human life and death; in which *not one person* is lost from God's eternal presence and abiding love. To let God's love abide is the new dispensation to which we are called. To *stop* looking for a God that protects us and to start trusting in a God that loves us and never leaves us come what may.

We do not know what this New Year will bring: it brings light. It brings hope. It brings Jesus home by another way. Home with us. Home in us. Abiding Light. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Also from that wonderful sermon by Dan Smith.