

A Not So Merry Christmas

Matthew 2:13-23

How was your Christmas? Was it a day of lots of food . . . lots of drink . . . lots of laughter . . . lots of family . . . lots of fun opening presents . . . maybe even an afternoon siesta? Was it a day full of peace and contentment? I hope so . . . I hope that Christmas spirit of peace and goodwill was part of your day as you gave thanks for the gift of God, born as a human being . . . our Immanuel . . . God is with us.

But, even as we lap up the Christmas spirit, I'm conscious of the many people . . . the many families . . . who struggled to find the joy at Christmas . . . who struggled to find the peace we always talk about . . . who struggled to find Immanuel . . . who wondered where the hell God was when they needed him! The families . . . the single people . . . for whom at Christmas, joy is replaced by pain and sadness . . . the people for whom peace is replaced by anguish . . . and the comforting voice of God is replaced by silence.

I'm thinking of those we know who have unexpectedly lost loved ones in this past year . . . and suddenly Christmas is not the same. I'm thinking of farmers who didn't get a harvest this year! Further afield, I'm thinking of the Christian minorities in Iran, Iraq and Egypt who suffer constant persecution . . . I'm thinking of all those for whom Christmas becomes a time of asking: "Where is God?"

For them, the sentiments of Christmas can't mask the harsh reality of life . . . of this world . . . a reality where accidents happen . . . where evil runs rampant . . . where the pain doesn't go away. And, really, none of us is far from that reality . . . all of us live in this world . . . all of us know that feeling of packing away the Christmas spirit for another year and facing reality again . . . and very few of us are immune from thinking, if not asking, the question: "Where is God in all of this?"

Perhaps it's a question on Mary and Joseph's lips too. After a rocky start things seemed to be looking up for them . . . a baby safely delivered . . . and, then the arrival of the magi . . . the wise men bearing their gifts fit for a king . . . that's more like it . . . their child was the Son of God, after all! They'd be forgiven for thinking they might get an easy ride from now on . . . God was with them . . . they were holding him in their arms . . . life would be good!

So, what a shock it must have been when the warm Christmas feelings of peace and goodwill suddenly turn to feelings of anxiety and terror. How quickly the dream turns to a nightmare . . . "Get up . . . take the child . . . flee to Egypt . . . Herod is looking to kill him . . . and probably you too"! How quickly the harsh reality of life strikes home. How quickly things seems to get out of control . . . out of our control . . . out of God's control too, it seems. For Mary and Joseph it must have seemed like it was Herod who was calling the shots . . . for those poor families in Bethlehem they must have been sure it was Herod who had all the power . . . who could carry out his murderous plan with impunity . . . and, where was God in all this?

Well, Matthew actually wrote his Christmas story to give an answer to that question. His is a story without shepherds and angels singing praises to God, and Mary quietly contemplating what it all means . . . from the outset, his is a story of uncertainty and worry . . . but, the answer the Gospel gives to that question is clear: God is not removed from the harsh reality of the world . . . God is not somewhere far away looking down helpless to do anything . . . God is right there . . . right here . . . in the midst of it all!

From the beginning Jesus was not immune to the effects of evil and the bad things that happen in this world . . . the murderous plans of Herod certainly impacted on him and his family . . . they caused hardship and pain . . . they forced the family to be refugees . . . left without a home . . . left without anything.

But, even though Herod's evil shattered the lives of many – including Mary and Joseph and Jesus – it could not thwart God's plan. God's plan wasn't for Jesus to sail through life without a care in the world . . . like some royal aristocrat divorced from real life . . . God's plan was to be with his people . . . all people . . . to experience what we experience . . . to laugh . . . to rejoice . . . to celebrate . . . to cry . . . to grieve . . . to suffer . . . and, yes, even to die. Jesus would die, as we all have to die, but at that first Christmas the time wasn't right . . . it wasn't Herod calling the shots . . . it wasn't Herod's plans that would prevail . . . it was God's plan . . . God's gracious plan to ultimately put an end to evil and suffering and death . . . to do it through the death and resurrection of his only Son. His plan was to bring life to all who face the harsh reality of death.

And, if this is starting to sound like an Easter sermon, it's meant to! We can't separate Christmas and Easter. At Christmas we celebrate that God is our Immanuel . . . he is with us . . . but, what gives expression to our joy, and substance to our hope, is that we know Jesus as the God who is with us to save us . . . to save us from our sins . . . to save us from the bitterness of death . . . to give us life . . . eternal life. That's God's plan . . . for all of us . . . but, it's a plan that we, like Mary and Joseph, hang onto only by faith . . . what we see around us with our eyes often tells a different story, but with our ears we hear the Christmas (and Easter) story of our God who is not helpless . . . who has done something . . . and who is not far away from us. That's the joy of Christmas.

But, what about those who struggle to find joy this Christmas? Those whose ears are blocked by what they've seen or experienced? What can we do for them?

Well, we can't take away their pain . . . there are no words that will do that . . . but we don't need to leave them with their pain either. We can be with them . . . be with them in their hurting . . . be with them in their searching and questioning . . . be with them as God is with us . . . make that a reality. And, in that reality we bring God's word . . . a word of promise and hope. God has not abandoned us.

Where is God? Right here with us. Immanuel . . . Saviour . . . Lord.

Amen.

Pastor John Strelan
St John's Lutheran Church, Unley
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