

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

Sunday, December 30, 2007

Sermon Text: Matthew 2:13-23

Let us pray. Holy Father, may the words of my mouth, and the meditation of every heart be acceptable unto You, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Now, a few churches ago, several years back, I had a choir director, who had a slightly mischievous side. Her name was Robin, and we had this tremendous Christmas party at her home, and there were people everywhere, overflowing, and music, and there was singing songs and decorations and food. It was wonderful. At one point, she had all these activities planned. She decided to divide up to sing “The Twelve Days of Christmas.” Some of you know how this goes. At that time I didn’t. She had me and one other guy singing the five golden rings part. Apparently, everybody in the room was in on this except me. We went through the whole song a couple of times, and each time, she said, “Louder, louder, louder!” When it got to the five golden rings part, about the third time through, everyone including my partner just got quiet so that my voice and my voice alone, loud and flat and horrible, was singing, “Five golden rings!” Like that. I still get shivers of embarrassment thinking about it. My jokes then as now don’t get much reaction, but I got a reaction that night.

A note sung off key or out of time can make anyone wince, sort of wince, and this reading this morning from the Gospel of Matthew also kind of makes us wince. If Christmas were a fairy tale, the next line would be, “And they lived happily ever after.” But it isn’t. Instead, it’s only the sixth day of Christmas, and we hear of power mad Herod having all the young boys, two-years-old and under, killed around Bethlehem trying to rid the world of his threat to power in Jesus.

There is another side to Christmas. So much we ignore about Christmas. We don’t really know the time of year. We chose the time in December, which for us is the darkest time of the year, and it really works beautifully, symbolically. The light came into the darkness. It is darkest this time of year, but as a historical fact, we just don’t know when Jesus was born. We chose a day, and this is the day, the week. We don’t really know the names of the Wise Men although you have heard traditions and tales and stories that we do. Nor is it likely that they were kings. What we do know, we sometimes romanticize.

When you think of it, being born in a feeding trough in a barn far from home is not all that glamorous, is it? There’s another side to Christmas. A side where the world and the cold reality rushes in. Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus were more than inconvenienced at his birth. They were threatened, and they were chased by a power mad tyrant, who wanted Jesus dead. Herod, when he met the Wise Men, the ever-slick politician, he lied to them saying, “As soon as you find him, report back to me so that I might go and worship him.” In the name of worship, with his simple lie, he sought to find Jesus to kill him.

Can you imagine they used to have leaders like that? They used to have leaders and factions who were that cruel and that power-mad. Yes, you can imagine, and they still

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do. Our memories are too short. We forget what power-mad leaders are capable of to keep power, and then we saw the sad news this past week from Pakistan. It reminds us, but then we soon forget when some other story replaces the news.

I've been, years ago, to Dachau and outside of Munich, one of the many slaughterhouses where Hitler used to exterminate the Jews, and some of the Jews who survived that death camp decided that if God was not going to halt such an evil then they weren't going to worship such a God. How about those in Bethlehem who had their own sons killed by Herod while he was searching for Jesus and Joseph and Mary as they escaped to Egypt? What did they think? When the Scripture says that Jesus was born in the light in the darkness, I think this is the source of darkness it means. Lies and murder and power-hungry tyrants, who will trample anyone to have their way. Sin written large, combined with power, is always violence.

Then we think of the other side. What of the German citizens in Dresden, who had their entire city, laid to waste by the allies. We forget, and the history books forget. A resolution this year almost passed our Congress remembering the genocide of perhaps one million Christian Armenians, who were killed by the Ottoman Church in 1914/1915, an actual historical fact, and we couldn't get a resolution passed to recall it, and most of us were never taught it and simply don't remember. In fact, evil banks on our not paying attention and our not remembering. Hitler said that he made plans to exterminate the Jews, and some questioned whether he could get by with it, and he said, "No one speaks of Armenia anymore." That quote is now inscribed on the Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC.

One of the best definitions of insanity, and you've heard this, and it's sort of a joke, but it's too true. One of the best definitions of insanity is to do the same thing over and over again, and expect a different result. For 2,000 years plus, the church has been doing the same thing over and over. I'm not sure that it's working. Maybe we are called instead to enter into the brokenness and the brutality and the confusion of our world with vulnerability and powerlessness and compassion as Jesus did. Maybe instead of just preaching Jesus and singing about Jesus, we are supposed to be like Jesus and identify with the outcasts, the downtrodden, the homeless, the despised. Maybe if we did that as the early Methodists did, we would get a different result. Maybe.

Too often we rejoice in what God has done for us in Bethlehem, and we think there's not really anything left for us to do. There is. We sometimes say, well, sure there's darkness in the world, but that's God's business. I'm not so sure. What if God in Christ has done what God is going to do? Sent His spirit and expects us to continue Jesus' ministry. What if taking on the darkness is now our job? What if giving light and hope and love to the outcast and to the guilty and to the fearful is now in our hands? What if the hopeless burden and the fearful flight into Egypt and the wrongful death on the cross itself is supposed to be a message to us that the world still dwells in darkness, and we the church are called in each new generation to reveal God's light again and again and again because the world forgets and darkness keeps coming back?

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Maybe the Christmas story challenges us to look not at our blessings, but instead at the world's pain, and calls us to offer hope as Jesus did by entering into it, hands on, personally offering God's hope? Maybe. We celebrate Christmas, and I really do not mean to be depressing or a downer, although some of you are saying, well, you are. We celebrate Christmas, and we should, but the biggest message sometimes gets missed. God has been with us. God has walked where we walk, and no matter how poor, how homeless, no matter how outcast, lonely, accused, or pursued or threatened or put down, God has known the same. God has entered into the darkness of our world, and so God certainly does understand the worst we have ever faced.

Christmas means God with us. As Isaiah predicted, therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Emmanuel, which means God with us. God's kingdom comes in most fully when we remember, when we remember that we walk on holy ground. You walk. I walk in a world, which has been made holy by the footsteps of Jesus Christ. No matter the hurt, the pain, the temptation, the guilt, the fear, the terror, Christ has redeemed, and can heal us all by his birth and life and death and resurrection. Christmas means God be sent into our darkness to feel what we feel, to know us up close and to make himself known.

As I said to the children, God is like Jesus. We need not fear. We need not cynically dismiss his offers. He's not like the other leaders of the world. He made good on his promises by taking him all the way to the cross, and he proved his word and his love for us by his blood. He proved himself powerfully enough to keep his word by overcoming death. Remember, you walk on holy ground, an earth, which has been visited by God, a world being redeemed by God. Now, we have a part to play. We have things to do. There is darkness aplenty still. There is need of Christ's light still. Because of Jesus' birth, death, and resurrection, because of the gift of God's Holy Spirit upon his church, upon us, I can say to you what you already know. I can remind you that you are called to be the light of the world. You and I are called to be the light of the world.

In the time of King Herod, Jesus was born. What Matthew means by that I believe is that in the worst times, in the darkest times, when Herod was King, Jesus was born, and because Jesus was born at such a time, we can have hope in whatever uncertainty, in whatever confusion, whatever fear we dwell, and we can offer hope to others as well.

I want to tell you a story, a true story. Frank Henet is the head of a multimillion-dollar contracting business. He had no use for Christmas. He didn't give Christmas bonuses. Adele, his wife, loved Christmas, and loved to decorate, but every year they had arguments over the decorating around the house. He said it was nonsense. Frank said Christmas is for children, and one brisk December morning, Frank decided to walk a few blocks into the city to work. He was walking through town, and he noticed a group of people standing in front of the department store window looking at Christmas displays. Frank paused at one of the windows, and he saw Mary and Joseph and the shepherds in colorful costumes, and then there was the child in the manger. Frank turned away, and he

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started to move on, and he noticed a sign across the street, which he hadn't seen before, and it said, “Holy Innocence Hall.” It said it in large brown letters. He stopped there, and he looked at it. It was an orphanage, but in his mind, he saw something else. He remembered years before, back when he used to go to Sunday school, the reading about King Herod, and the murder of all the young boys around Bethlehem two-years-old and under, and he remembered how that was called the Holy Innocence. It dawned on him. He said there is more to Christmas than just syrupy sweet. There is reality and misery as well. At that moment, Frank remembered his own son, who had died at the tender age of 18 months. His son was David, and he died some 22 years before, but it was still difficult for Frank to even mention him, to say his name aloud even though he thought of him a million times. That evening, Frank and Adele dined alone, and he said, “I went to visit an orphanage today.” His wife thought to herself that she never imagined him doing such a thing. Then he told her about the conditions that he found. He said it was almost like a dungeon. It was cramped and dark and dismal and old. As he was visiting, a little boy came up to him, and stroked his sleeve, and Frank said, “I’ll never forget that.” He said, “You know full well that I’ve always said that Christmas is for children.” Then he added a different twist, “Well, it’s about time that somebody was doing something for them. Today I gave that place some money. They’re going to build a wing with it.” It must have been some money. Adele was swept away by her husband’s kindness, and then he said the next statement, “They’re going to name it for David. They’re going to name it for our son, David.”

Christmas came home for Frank Hennet that day. He understood that his being and that his resources were for him to spread and to echo the light of Christ into a world of darkness, and he did.

When Herod died, God again spoke to Joseph in a dream, and said, “Get up and take the child, and go to the land of Israel for those who were seeking the child’s life are dead.” So they picked up and they returned to their home where they would raise Jesus until He became a man and began his ministry, but Mary and Joseph had no more certainty about what the future held for them than we have this last week of the year 2007. They knew only one thing for sure. No matter what happened, God was with them, in good times and bad. That’s the best news we can ever have. God is with us, and we are never alone. When we know that, that’s good, but when we live that out, that’s better. So we are to show God’s light in all the ways that we can. The world needs as much light as we can give it. As children of the light, as children of hope, if we do not share light and hope, how will people know?

As I close, I want to share with you an ancient parable, a Jewish parable, based upon a Hassidic tale. I don’t know that I’ve ever told this before, but it’s worth hearing.

A prince in a far distant country dreamed of a place where people might live in perfect community, in fair and loving relationships, and unity. The prince called together the people to form such a community through a covenant. The sign of the covenant would be for him or for her to bring a bottle of their finest wine, and when they arrived at the place

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where the covenant was to be made, each person was to take his or her bottle of the finest wine, and pour it into a great bowl to symbolize that each person was bringing his or her best to form the community. A man thought to himself. This certain man thought, if I bring my finest wine, my finest bottle, and pour it into there with everyone else's, what good would that do? All of the distinctive bouquet and flavor and character of the wine will be lost and swallowed up with everyone else's wine. So he said to himself, I will take a bottle of my best wine. I'll keep it for myself, and fill the bottle with water. Who will know the difference? That way I won't be wasting my precious vintage. When the day for the founding of the community came, each person came and poured the contents of his or her bottle into a great bowl. Then the prince had everyone take a cup to drink from the bowl to seal their covenant community, and to everyone's horror, what they dipped out of the bowl was water, just water. Every single person had done the same thing. They had substituted water for their finest wine.

The one who gave us the finest wine calls us to bring our very best gifts to life, not just here, but to life to those we meet, to those with whom we have contact, to those over whom we have influence, our very best to serve the cause of Christ, to build community not just here, but extending out and beyond here, to challenge the darkness. Like the Magi let us follow God's light in spite of the darkness and danger, in spite of the confusion and fear that we face from time to time, let us follow the Magi as they have brought their greatest treasure. As we bring our greatest treasure, ourselves, who we are and the talents we have and what we own to serve the King and to build God's kingdom. There is darkness, yes, but because of Christmas we know there is light. There is light in the darkness, and because of God's spirit in the Church, we are called to be the light of the world. We continue the ministry of Christ. We thank God for this mission, for this ministry, and this hope. Amen.