

Date: December 24, 2007

CHRISTMAS EVE

SERMON: Like Us In Every Way

Text(s): Isaiah 63:7-10; Hebrews 2: 10-18;
Matthew 2:13-23

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Two weeks after Christmas, when the kindergarten Sunday School class came into their classroom, they discovered that their room looked very different. For weeks leading up to Christmas, their teacher had been helping the children draw pictures of the Christmas story and then decorating the bulletin boards and walls with them. There were pictures of the shepherds, and Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus, and the Wise Men. But two weeks later, in place of the Christmas decorations and pictures of the Christmas story, there were pictures of a grown-up Jesus in various situations depicted in the gospel stories about his ministry. Six-year old Samantha, with a rather disappointed look on her face, pointed to one of the pictures and asked the teacher, "Who is that man?"

"That's Jesus," replied her teacher.

Little Samantha shook her head in bewilderment and said, "Boy, he sure grew up fast."

Little Samantha was more right than she knew. The story in Matthew's gospel which we read this evening, is a part of the Christmas story that we pass over quickly when we read the lessons, and sometimes even leave out altogether. Luke's gospel has the story we prefer, except for the bit about the Wise Men which we have to get from Matthew, but in our mental images of the Holy Family, created by centuries of pious imagination and generations of church Christmas pageants and every Nativity Scene ever made, we see Luke's version of the story with Mary and Joseph in a stable, surrounded by kindly animals, humble shepherds, and adoring Magi, with the "little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay," in the center of the frame. We don't usually mentally picture the Holy Family as political refugees. The baby

Jesus as a fugitive from the murderous jealousy of a corrupt ruler before he's able to walk or talk doesn't form part of our traditional mental picture of Christmas, does it? Yet, there it is, a prominent part of Matthew's narrative. Nothing like starting out life as a refugee, in exile in a foreign land to make one grow up fast.

Since Matthew's Gospel is the controlling gospel for this new year's cycle of lectionary readings, it's perhaps fitting that we pay attention to this lesser known and lesser loved Christmas story. Matthew's Christmas story, is the one most valued by the Coptic Christians of Egypt, as we discovered when we were in Cairo for a pastors and spouses conference nearly ten years ago. One of the places we visited was a lovely old church on the bank of the Nile that is a major site of pilgrimage as well as a tourist attraction. It stands on the spot where the Holy Family supposedly found refuge. We also discovered, in one of the old Coptic neighborhoods a house and several other sites associated with the sojourn of the Holy Family in Egypt. As is often the case when signs are erected in several different languages, sometimes hilarious misspellings or mistranslations occur, and in this case it was a consistent misspelling of the word Holy. The signs pointed us to the places where the *Holly* Family had stayed. You can probably imagine the fun a group of irreverent pastors and their spouses did with that!

As I shared with the Confirmation Class a few weeks ago when we studied Luke's and Matthew's Christmas stories with each other, Matthew's agenda seems to be to portray Jesus as a new Moses. In the accounts of Moses' birth and infancy in Egypt that we find in the Book of Exodus, the Pharaoh orders all Hebrew children under the age of two to be killed, so that the Hebrews will not be able to become more numerous or raise up leaders who will rebel against their Egyptian masters. But Moses is miraculously spared that dire fate when the Pharaoh's own daughter finds him hidden in a tiny ark hidden in the reeds along the riverbank. Moses survives to become the one who

eventually leads the Israelites out of Egypt to freedom.

So Matthew casts King Herod as the new Pharaoh whose wrath and jealousy threatens the life of the baby who Matthew believes is the one chosen by God to be the new liberator of Israel from their new masters. Ironically, the Holy Family flees to Egypt to escape Herod's soldiers; the former place of slavery now becomes the place of refuge, where the Messiah grows in safety until Herod, the oppressor, is dead. Only then, the new liberator, the new Moses, comes back to lead his people to a new freedom.

For us, however, besides providing an opportunity to admire Matthew's literary artistry in paralleling the story of the infant Jesus with the older story of the infant Moses, this largely ignored part of the Christmas story has other value. All of us live in a world that forces us to "grow up fast." All of us live in a world where social forces or powerful individuals or governments or random accidents or our own bad choices make us feel as though we are not in control of our lives. We never really are, and never really were, if we stop to think about it, but most of the time, we live our lives and make our plans as though we were. Matthew's Christmas story is a very, very human story. An unmarried, pregnant mother, a fiancé facing possible scandal while trying to do the right thing, an oppressive king who threatens the very life of the newborn baby, a mother and father trying desperately to protect their child—it's a story worthy of Hollywood, isn't it? It hooks us because it's our story. It's a human story.

The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, after affirming that both we and Christ share the same origin in God, goes on to say, "*Therefore, he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every way, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those of us who are being tested.*" Or as

Isaiah puts it so eloquently in the passage we read this evening: "*In all our distress, God was distressed.*"

This claim, which is staggering in its implications, is unique to the Christian gospel. The story of Jesus is different from all other stories precisely in the claim that in a specific year of human history, in a particular country, in circumstances of political oppression and occupation rule by a puppet king of a foreign emperor, in a struggle for survival, the God who created the worlds, who created human life, who is involved with human beings in creating and guiding human history, stepped into that history and became subject to the full range of the human experience. *Like us in every way.*

In a television interview, shortly after the first Gulf War, actor Glenn Ford told a true story of his own experience in the Vietnam War. He recalled a time when his unit was struggling through the steamy swamps of South Vietnam during a large operation under infrequent, but deadly enemy fire. Since he had just arrived in the area the day before, many of the men in the unit didn't know that a well-known Hollywood actor was among them. While sloshing through hip-deep water, a young private nearby suddenly recognized the veteran actor. Glenn Ford, seeing the amazed look on the private's face, smiled and assured the young man that, yes, he was indeed, the Glenn Ford from the movies. The private smiled an ear-to-ear grin and said, "Well, don't that beat all! You're just one of us, ain't you?"

In Matthew's story of the holy family in flight for their lives, we see a picture of a God who has chosen to be "just one of us." God knows every aspect of our human existence intimately—the joys and sorrows, the fear, the loss of control and the anguish that we human beings live with. This is the truth that we dress up with the fancy theological name of the Doctrine of the Incarnation.

That's why it's important that we don't

pass too quickly over Matthew's Christmas story, for it incarnates our own human experiences. We all know, particularly if we have lived long enough, that the joy and wonder and loveliness that we associate with Christmas is also mixed with grief, the pain of loss, and loneliness for many, both in our personal lives and in the social and political arenas as well. We can hardly escape the irony that the birthplace of Jesus—Bethlehem—is as dangerous and violent a place today as it was in Mary and Joseph's day. Matthew's story powerfully affirms that God is present with us even in those most painful and fearful times of our lives—nothing that touches us can be alien to God.

So how does knowing that help us? How does it work itself out in helping us cope with our losses and our fears and our loneliness and our anxieties? Well, how did it work out in the life of the Holy Family? In Matthew's telling, rescue didn't come from some divine intervention from outside history. It came from a man who was willing to live by his faith in God's presence and promise, enough to take some real risks. If Mary is the heroine of Luke's Christmas story, Joseph is the hero of Matthew's. He is the one who first takes the risk of social embarrassment when his betrothed is found to be pregnant, marrying her anyway and claiming her child as his own. He is the one who listens to his dreams and takes his family to safety, even though it means leaving his own life behind. He is the one who listens again and risks returning to where Herod's successor still rules at imperial Rome's pleasure. In all these situations, he is a model of what trusting faith is all about. Joseph listened to his dreams, and believed the vision of God's faithfulness which he carried inside his mind and heart. Joseph could have stayed in the relative safety of Egypt, and we would probably never have heard of him or Mary or a baby named Jesus. But Joseph trusted that behind the appearances that Herod the Great was calling the shots, in reality, God was at work. And he acted on that trust. He

didn't take the safe way, the easy way, the comfortable and least fearful way. He took the risks that faith demanded. He left Egypt and returned to Palestine, believing that God was actively working on his and his family's behalf. And in the end, it is Herod, and not the baby born in the stable, who disappears from history.

God's behind-the-scenes work didn't preserve his Messiah from tasting the full, often bitter range of human experience; the Holy Family were homeless and afraid and exiled. But in going beyond their feelings of fear and helplessness to trust God in the midst of those circumstances, they discovered that beyond the "Why" question, there was a "Who" question. Whom would they trust? Whose power is the real power? Who is really present in this situation in ways that can only be discerned by faith? By faith, they discerned that there was a deeper, more enduring faithfulness of God which could not be permanently thwarted, even if it was temporarily obscured from view by the arrogant violence of King Herod.

Matthew's Christmas story is an invitation to us to live in hope—to live by our trust in a God who is with us in every experience of life, as Joseph and Mary did. Even when we cannot see the end of the story, from our vantage point, even when it is difficult for us to discern where God's presence is, we are called to trust that our lives have a deeper meaning, a deeper fulfillment than we can see at any given moment. That hope is based on the faith that God has entered into our human life fully, and therefore, God is with us, not to intervene from outside, but to transform us and our situations from inside, if we are willing to look deeply, to wait patiently, to act courageously. And in that hopeful, trusting, faithful living through our very real lives, we will discover the help of the One who "had to be made like his brothers and sisters in every way." We have nothing to lose but our fears.