

The Rev. Stephen W. Best
January 3, 2010
2nd Sunday of Christmas
Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23

The Courage to Live Dangerously

Christmas has the power to change lives. That's why we need twelve holy days, not just one, to tell the great story.

Today's lectionary reading from the Gospel of Matthew describes the next chapter of the Christmas story, the part that doesn't normally get much air time on TV: the flight of Joseph, Mary, and the baby Jesus into Egypt to escape danger after being warned through a dream.

The reading presumes that the wise men have already arrived. But that hasn't happened for us yet, as we won't be celebrating Epiphany and the arrival of the Magi until next week.

And to make the unfolding of the story even more confusing, the preacher has chosen to preach on a different text than what is actually printed in your bulletins. So folks, hold on tight, keep listening, and the entire story of Christmas will eventually get told.

Off in the distance, from the town of modern day Bethlehem, one can still see the hilltop on which once sat the summer palace and royal mausoleum of one of the mightiest rulers of ancient Palestine, Herod the Great.

Herod was considered great because of his political genius, having avoided being overthrown by frequently and craftily shifting his alliances with the super powers of his day.

He was also considered great because of his architectural achievements, having planned and executed the construction of the second temple in Jerusalem.

But inside this great and powerful man was someone crazy with paranoia and insecurity who murdered all kinds of rivals to his throne—real and imagined.

This list included his wife, his mother, three of his sons, and allegedly all of the babies in the region of Bethlehem—anyone who might be Jesus, the newborn king, and therefore a potential threat to his rule.

The Roman Emperor Augustus once said that it was safer to be Herod's pig than Herod's son. I think we could all agree with that assessment. But the line from Shakespeare's Hamlet says it all, "**You can't out-Herod Herod!**"

The differences between King Jesus and King Herod could not be more pronounced:

Jesus was born in a stable; Herod lived in a palace;

Jesus was a helpless and vulnerable infant; Herod possessed great worldly power;

Jesus proved to be a man of great compassion; Herod proved to be a man of great violence.

And yet, if we are honest, even though many of us would say we are attempting to follow Christ, there is a little bit of Herod in all of us—which, of course, is not a very pleasant thought. After all, who among us hasn't been a control freak at some time in our lives, or deeply jealous of someone else's beauty, charm, power, or wealth? Herod had his reasons for his deep insecurities, and if he had a skilled analyst, the course of history might have been changed.

Herod was not the legitimate King of the Jews. In fact, he was of Arab descent. His father had swung an amazing deal with Julius Caesar that had put his family into power. Herod had done nothing virtuous to earn his position of leadership. Nowhere had he demonstrated that he was the most qualified candidate for the job; it was simply given to him as a birthright.

Herod sought to destroy the light of Christ which threatened to expose his deepest fears, insecurities, and need to control no matter what the cost to himself, his family, or his subjects. We all know it is far easier to let fear control us than to let God transform us. Today, God invites us to let the light of Christ's birth into our hearts, so that we too might be delivered of our insecurities, fears, and the need to control our lives.

We are called to be a people of faith, following the direction of the Holy Spirit, who operates the most reliable global positioning system known to humanity and teaches us to travel through life with confidence and hope.

As wonderful as the miracle of God being born through Mary in the Christmas story is, it is important to not miss the miracle of the courageous faith walk that the holy family took to Egypt.

Mary, Joseph, and Jesus were political refugees forced to leave their friends and family and travel far away from their homeland into the unknown wilderness of Egypt, where they would be dependent on strangers for their care and angels for their directions. Through it all, God protected and provided for them. That is good news, but the best news is that God is still making holy families and leading them out of danger.

Over the Christmas holiday, our family had the chance to see a wonderful movie called *The Blindside*. It is based on the real story of an African-American professional football player by the name of Michael Oher, who overcomes the terror of his childhood through the love of a wealthy Caucasian family who attempted, however imperfectly, to put their Christian beliefs into practice.

Even though Michael Oher had been abandoned by both of his birth parents at an early age, going from foster home to foster home, and struggled greatly in school, through the care of his adoptive family he learns to give love another chance and receive the nutrients needed to grow and eventually blossom.

His adoptive family is equally transformed as they develop the strength to handle criticism by their friends, racial prejudice, and overcome allegations that they had exploited Michael's athletic ability for their personal gain.

Although the movie is far from being politically correct or perfectly crafted, it does offer a real story of how genuine love transforms fear and breaks down the barriers created by wealth, power, class and privilege.

Peeling away the layers of veneer and racial stereotype, the true and loveable selves which comprise the main characters of this movie drama are eventually

fully revealed, and a whole and holy family is born out of brokenness. It offers hope to all of us that we, too, can help create and belong to a holy family not afraid to travel where God wants us to go.

2009 was not an easy year for many of us in our St. Thomas family. Some of you are struggling with your marriages or with your kids. Some of you are carrying heavy loads of grief due to the death of loved ones or the threat of illness. Others of you are without jobs or are financially stressed. Some of you are in relationships at home, work, or school in which you worry about being hurt or harmed.

Whatever your fear is, know that God has sent you a message this Christmas season, either through a dream or some other means—a message of encouragement and hope to help guide you and those you love through whatever danger you may be in. We are all called to follow the brave footsteps of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus as we follow our way to safety and new beginnings.

In the words of Henri Nouwen:

Hardly a day passes in our lives without our experience of inner or outer fears, anxieties, apprehensions, and preoccupations. These dark powers have pervaded every part of our world to such a degree that we can never fully escape them.

Still it is possible not to belong to these powers, not to build our dwelling place among them, but to choose the house of love as our home.

This choice is made not just once and for all but by living a spiritual life ... for these worldly fears have no final power over us.

Christmas has the power to change everything. We all know it is far easier to let fear control us than to let God transform us. And yet we remain faithful. Like Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus, God has given us a safe and holy place in his heart to dwell and find the strength to live dangerously and courageously this New Year and remain on the path of transformation God has chosen for us. Amen.