

Crib and Cross

William Cwirla

Matthew 2:13–23

There is a woodcut by Albrecht Duerer from the time of the Reformation depicting the infant Jesus in the manger. Angels are hovering overhead as Mary attend to Him. Joseph stands off to the left looking through a doorway. There are a couple of shepherds poking their heads in, looking over Mary's shoulder. The roof is a thatched roof with some considerable holes in it. But what is most notable is the way the roof beams intersect to form a cross that hovers over the manger. This was typical in the way Duerer depicted the birth of Jesus. The cross always loomed large over the manger.

That's how it is with this morning's Gospel reading from St. Matthew on this first Sunday after Christmas. A hasty flight to Egypt. The slaughter of the baby boys of Bethlehem. And the return of the holy family to settle in Nazareth. Today, December 26th, also happens to be St. Stephen's Day. Stephen was the first martyr of the church, stoned to death by the Sanhedrin for His preaching. The cross looms large over the Christmas story and over this Child of Bethlehem.

Again an angel appears to Joseph in a dream. He first heard of Jesus in a dream, when the angel had told him of Mary's miraculous pregnancy. And now he is told by an angel in a dream to flee Israel and go to Egypt, "for Herod is about to search for the child to destroy him." They said it was safer to be one of Herod's dogs than to be one of his sons. Herod guarded his throne with a paranoiac zeal. He was determined to destroy this little One whom the wise men hailed as "King of the Jews." Herod lay claim to that title, though he was neither truthfully a king or a Jew. Jesus had to go. There was no question in Herod's mind.

And so in the middle of the night, Joseph got up and took the Child and his mother and went to Egypt and stayed there until Herod died. There was a large colony of Jews living Egypt, and the gold, incense, and myrrh the wise men gave would help with the costs. They would be safe.

In the book of Genesis, the sons of Jacob sought refuge from a famine in Egypt and were rescued by their brother Joseph. Here, the Son of God is rescued in Egypt by another dreamer named Joseph. The connection is fairly obvious. Jesus is going the way of Israel. He is Israel reduced to one man. Even in His early childhood, when He was less than two years old, what happens to Him is to fulfill the prophets. In this case the prophet Hosea, who centuries before had said, "Out of Egypt I called my son." Hosea was referring to the exodus and Israel's coming out of Egypt. Now little Jesus, a tiny child under the protection of His parents, is whisked off to Egypt to fulfill the purpose and destiny of Israel, literally to be Israel.

We might be surprised at this. Isn't this the Son of God? The eternal Word? The King of kings and Lord of lords? There is more power in His omnipotent little finger than all the kings and kingdoms of this world. And yet He goes the way of weakness. Instead of having angels protecting Him, He goes under the protective custody of Joseph. The Lord of all must be protected and sheltered in Egypt until the right time, the fulness of time. This was not yet the time, nor was it His hour. Jesus would die one day under a different King Herod on a cross outside of Jerusalem. But not now, and not in this way. First He must do His exodus and come out of Egypt. He is the fulfillment of Israel.

With Jesus safely tucked in Egypt, Herod goes into a rage when he realizes the wise men were not returning. They were supposed to identify the child so he could kill Him. Instead, Herod resolves to kill all the baby boys in the vicinity of Bethlehem two years old and under, just to be sure he gets Jesus. Given the population, there probably weren't all that many, but even one is too many. It's called the "slaughter of the innocents" and we commemorate them on December 28th, three days after Christmas. That's this Tuesday.

It's a bitter and sad part of the Christmas story. There is a sad carol written in a minor key about this called the Coventry Carol. The cross looms large over the Christmas story. You can't get away from it. No matter how much tinsel you wind around it, no matter how cheery you try to be, no matter how many Fa-la-las you belt out, the cross is inescapable. These young children, these baby boys of Bethlehem, died because they resembled Jesus.

Again, mother Rachel, the wife of Jacob, who stands for all the mothers of Israel, weeps for her children. She saw her children slaughtered and carted off to exile in Babylon. The history of OT Israel is soaked in blood and the tears of Rachel. Yet this too happened to fulfill the word of the prophet. Everything that happens to Jesus and because of Jesus is to fulfill the word of the

prophet. He came to fulfill Moses and the prophets, to live out their words, to do what Israel was supposed to do, to be the servant-son of God for the blessing and life of the world.

Several years later, again by way of an angel in a dream, Joseph gets word that it is safe to return to Israel. And so Jesus, little Israel, makes His exodus from Egypt back to the land of promise. “Out of Egypt I have called my Son.” The King returns, but there’s another Herod reigning now. And another dream. Poor Joseph. You wonder if he ever got a decent night’s sleep! Instead of Jerusalem, the capital, instead of Bethlehem, David’s birthplace, the family settles in Nazareth, a frontier town tucked way up in the far northwest corner of Galilee.

This too is to fulfill the word of the prophets. “He shall be called a Nazarene.” If you look carefully in the old testament, you won’t find that sentence anywhere. In fact, Nazareth didn’t exist in the OT. It was a guard city that developed later, watching over the northwest high lands. People aren’t sure what from where the name derives. It could mean “watchman,” referring to its strategic position. Or it could mean branch.

Both would apply to Jesus. He is Israel’s watchman, prophesied by Ezekiel, and the Branch of David’s family tree spoken of by Isaiah. Or it may be simply this: He was despised and rejected, even as Nazareth was despised by the Jews of Judah and Jerusalem. “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” they asked.

The cross looms large over Christmas. It’s unescapable. The sweet, almost romantic story of swaddling cloths and a manger, angels and shepherds, the sublime peace of that wonderful night gives way to the harsh reality of what it means when God enters our world. It means threat and flight and bloodshed and rejection. The Word is vulnerable. He goes into hiding, He withdraws, He can be hunted down, He must be protected.

And once again, our preconceived notions of God are utterly destroyed. We expect a God who exerts His power with force and might. We get a God whose power is exerted in weakness and vulnerability. We expect a God who saves from the top down; we get a God who saves from the bottom up. We expect a God who is a winner among the winners of this world, who isn’t threatened by the Herods and the Pontus Pilates; we get a God who overcomes the powers and principalities by falling into their clutches and being crucified.

Sin and Death must be defeated from the bottom up, not the top down. Were God to execute a plan of divine “shock and awe” we would more than shocked and awed, we’d be dead and damned. Were God to use His power to save us, He would utterly destroy us. Instead He works

His power in weakness – hiddenly, subversively – a baby in a manger, a child growing up in Nazareth, the man of the cross.

He doesn't conquer Sin by use of force, by giving us rules to follow and threats if we don't do them. He conquers Sin by become Sin for us. He conquers Death by going to Death for us. We can't save ourselves. We don't even want to save ourselves. Our humanity has accommodated this foreign element called Sin. We even trick ourselves into thinking that it's perfectly human to sin. That's how comfortable we have become with Sin. We think that Death is a natural end to life. We even speak of death by "natural causes," but Death is entirely unnatural and Sin is completely unhuman.

God snuck into the world in Bethlehem. He hid out in Egypt. He lived in obscurity in Nazareth. And while no one was watching, He conquered Sin, Death and Devil. You might think that it would have made more sense for Him to make His appearing today. We have CNN and MSNBC and the internet. As the line from Jesus Christ Superstar goes, "Israel in 4 BC had no mass communication." And the Word doesn't need it. He doesn't need our mass communication. In fact, at times it seems, He's better off without it.

God sneaks up on us too. Baptism water. Bread and wine. A humble preached Word. Easily ignored, easily rejected. Despised by those who will not believe it. But for those who believe, for those whom God has granted the gift of faith, it is the power of God to save. All that this Child of Bethlehem is for you and all He did for you is given you here in His Word, in Baptism, in the Supper. It's an awesome strength hidden under weakness to save you.

Durer was right. Jesus always comes with a cross. The cross looms large over your life too. Your Baptism doesn't make you immune from diseases, from persecution, from hardship, from suffering. On the contrary, your Baptism and your confession make you a target for the Herods of this world. You are marked men and women. You bear the mark of the Lamb. And in His hidden strength, He comes to save you.

In the name of Jesus,

Amen

SOURCE

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