

Second Sunday after Christmas: Matthew 2:13–23

William Cwirla

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The fullness of time had come. Chronos was bursting at the seams with the Promise of God. Nothing that happens concerning Jesus – His conception by a Virgin, His birth in Bethlehem, His flight to Egypt, the baby boys who were killed because they resembled Him, His return and residency in Nazareth – none of this was accidental. The word of the prophets had to be fulfilled. The mouth of the Lord had spoken, and it was going to happen at just the right time, in the fullness of time. This is how the Word of the Lord works. It is spoken and it is done. Maybe not right away. In fact, rarely right away. But the Word spoken is already the event, shaping history, ordering all things toward the fullness of time.

When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive adoption as sons. God sent His Son so that we might be sons. He was born of woman that we might be born of God. He was born under the law that we might be born under grace. He became flesh to dwell among us so that we might dwell with God in the flesh. The Son of God came in the fullness of time, at just the right time, to redeem humanity held captive to Sin, Death, and the Law.

He came to redeem, to buy back, “not with gold or silver, but with His holy precious blood and His innocent suffering and death.” That’s why the Son of God came as the virgin’s Son. He is sinless humanity dwelling among sinners as bone of our bones and flesh of our flesh. Like us in every way except for one thing – He did not have Father Adam’s Sin, that deep corruption of our humanity that makes every thought, word, and deed of ours sinful, no matter how holy it may appear. He came that we might be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in eternal righteousness, innocence, and blessedness which are His gift to you. He was born into our humanity that our humanity might be born into God, that we might receive adoption as sons of God.

The “fullness of time” does not mean that things will go smoothly and easily. Quite the opposite. Herod wants to kill Jesus. He’s a threat to the throne, or so Herod believes. Herod wants to be the “King of the Jews” and will stop at nothing to secure the title. The wise men’s inquiry about a king being born troubled Herod enough to kill all the baby boys in Bethlehem 2 years old and under just to be sure he got Jesus. But the fullness of time had not yet come for His death. His “hour” had not yet come. It would, one Friday afternoon some 30 years later, but not just now. Now He has to be whisked off to Egypt by Joseph guided by angels in a dream. Like Israel before Him, Jesus goes to Egypt for safety until the fullness of time had come and Herod had died. And then, like Israel before Him, He makes His exodus out of Egypt. The Word through the prophet Hosea had come to the fullness of its time. “Out of Egypt have I called my son.”

The Son is protected. His life is spared, but not so His contemporaries, the baby boys of Bethlehem, whose only “crime” is that they resemble Jesus. They fall to Herod’s sword. We don’t know how many were killed. Bethlehem was not very big. But even one child is too many. Couldn’t God have intervened? Couldn’t the Father have sent angels to all the fathers of Bethlehem so they could flee Herod too? Why was Jesus spared and the rest of the babies were not?

Those are questions that arise whenever we meet with the death of “innocents.” It’s been a year since Sandy Hook and still those questions are asked. Why didn’t God intervene to save those children? At face value, it seems unfair. God’s Son gets whisked to safety in Egypt, and Rachel once again weeps for her children. Some might use this episode as an illustration of the weakness, perhaps even the non-existence, of God. Surely if there is a God, He would not let despotic dictators slay innocent children. So the logic of theodicy goes. How do you reconcile the evil of Herod and the goodness of God? If God is merciful and powerful, if He is loving as well as omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent, then why doesn’t He exert His “omnis” and do something about it? Why doesn’t God just take a preemptive hit out on Herod and spare the baby boys and their grieving parents? In fact, Herod did die some time after that, so you might say that God eventually DID put a hit out on him, but why not sooner, and why not soon enough to save the baby boys of Bethlehem?

I ask those questions knowing full well I dare not answer them. We are not given the answer to many of our “why” questions. “Why” is a question spoken into the silence of despair when nothing makes sense. We want some kind of handy explanation, a one size fits all answer for

the tragedies that surround us and that invade our lives. There are plenty of mothers today weeping for their children who are no more and refusing to be comforted by superficial answers. They don't need to hear things like "God needed them more than you do" or "God spared them the trials and tribulations of adulthood" or "God had a purpose in letting them die."

There is no "sense" to the episode, no reasonable explanations that can bring "closure" to a mother's grief. There is only a king so drunk on power that he's willing to kill anyone who gets in the way of his agenda and a God who seems either unwilling or unable to stop him or at least intervene on behalf of the innocents.

To get a bead on things, you need to focus on that singular Child who, at least at the moment, seems to be the object of God's attention, the One who gets whisked off to Egypt to escape the sword of Herod. He's the One you need to pay attention to. He's God Child, the prophetic promise fulfilled, the promised Seed of the woman who would crush the head of the serpent and deal decisively with Sin and Death once for all. Saving those baby boys of Bethlehem would have saved them and spared their mothers Rachel's tears, but it would not have saved the world or them from Sin and Death. If we can discern anything at all about God's agenda, it's that He's intent on saving the world. Not just bits and pieces of the world. Not just a handful of people here and there. The world. The cosmos. Everything He created by the Word, He intends to redeem and save by the Word.

Scripture and our common experience tell us that God isn't so much into personal intervention. He's not our micromanager in heaven. He doesn't prevent tidal waves, earthquakes, stray bullets, drunk drivers, despotic dictators, and cancer cells from happening. He seems to leave things free to operate according to the laws of nature He established. Miracles are exceedingly rare. So rare, you shouldn't expect one. If you could expect one and dial it up on demand, then it wouldn't be a miracle.

Instead, the Father focuses all His attention on His Son. That's the One who needs to be protected in Egypt. That's the One who needs to be spared Herod's sword. That's the One who must come out of Egypt and live in Nazareth. That's the One the prophets were speaking about. "This is my beloved Son," the Father says to Him in His Baptism. And in focusing all His energies and attention on the Son, the Word made Flesh, the Father focuses all His creative love and energy on the world because the Son embodies the world. He is the Word through whom the world was made. He is the Word that is the light and life of all men. He is

all of humanity in one Man, the second Adam, who brings life and forgiveness and reconciliation and peace. “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting men’s sins against them.” “God loved the world in this way, that He sent His only-begotten Son.” “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”

Herod died. The children died. You will die. But the important thing, the one thing that matters, is that Jesus died and rose. And in that one death, the world and all its Sin and unreconciled evil is reconciled.

So we can never say that God does nothing to intervene in the face of sudden and evil death and suffering. God did the one thing that needed to be done. He sent His Son to be born into our flesh and to die and rise to save us. God, for whatever His reasons, did not spare the baby boys of Bethlehem from Herod’s sword, but He redeemed their lives on Jesus’ cross. Every life and every death, including theirs, is accounted for in the death of Jesus.

He came that you might receive adoption as sons of God. Your Baptism is your adoption papers. You are sons of God by adoption in His Son. And I say “sons” even of the ladies, though it may sound a bit strange. We are all sons in the Son, in Christ, not in ourselves. When the Father looks at us, He sees us through His Son whom He called out of Egypt. That means that everything that belongs to the Son is yours. His righteousness, His holiness, His blessedness, His peace, His kingdom is all yours. By His Spirit, you pray “our Father” to His Father. And thanks to Him, you are no longer slaves to Sin, Death, and the Law.

You are free sons in the Son, heirs of the kingdom, children of God. That doesn’t make you safe in this world. Or any more privileged. Even daily bread comes to the good and evil, the believing and the unbelieving alike. We suffer the same injustices, the same diseases, the same tragedies. Herod’s sword doesn’t discriminate. But the kingdom is ours in God’s Son, spared at Bethlehem but crucified on Calvary so that in Him you would be safe forever.

This happened to fulfill the word spoken through the prophets in the fullness of time.

In the Name of Jesus,

Amen.

SOURCE

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Hacienda Heights, CA (htlcms.org), "Matthew 2:13-23 / 29 December 2013 (Christmas 1)", posted 2013-12-29 (<https://htlcms.org/2013/12/mt-213-23-29-december-2013/>).