

“The Dark Side of Christmas”

“A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.”

In 1983, Paul McCartney released the song *Pipes of Peace*, which was inspired by the “Christmas Truce” of 1914 that occurred between Allied and German soldiers on the front lines in France during World War I. Late on Christmas Eve 1914, men of the British Expeditionary Force heard German troops in the trenches opposite them singing Christmas carols and patriotic songs and saw lanterns and small fir trees along their trenches. Messages began to be shouted between the trenches; and on the following day, British and German soldiers met in “no man’s land” and exchanged gifts, took photographs and played impromptu games of football. Sadly, this truce and resulting camaraderie among enemy forces only lasted through Christmas Day; on Boxing Day, the gruesome war that claimed hundreds of thousands of lives resumed. In his lyrics that reflect on this all-too-brief cessation of hostility, McCartney yearns for a time when the “pipes of peace” might be heard not only on Christmas Day, but every day:

- “I light a candle to our love; in love our problems disappear. But all in all, we soon discover that one and one is all we long to hear ... What do you say? Will the human race be run in a day? Or will someone save this planet we’re playing on? Is it the only one? Help them to see that the people here are like you and me. Let us show them how to play the pipes of peace.”

The Christmas Truce during the first year of the First World War is a sad reminder of how fleeting moments of peace can be, that even though soldiers on opposite sides of the battlefield got to know one another as human beings and not merely enemies that when the day is over they went back to fighting and killing each other. The temporary nature of this truce is a reminder of the lamentation of the prophet Jeremiah, crying out that “*they have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, ‘Peace, peace, ’when there is no peace.*” (Jeremiah 6:14). We long for a time when there will be “peace on earth, good will toward all people” – but such peace seems fleeting, and unrealistic hope in a world that cannot even take one day to stop their fighting and fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah of a day when “*they shall beat their*

swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.” (Isaiah 2:4).

It was only a few short days ago that we gathered to celebrate the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, the one who fulfilled another of Isaiah’s prophecy that “*a child has been born to us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*” (Isaiah 9:6). The birth of the son of Mary in the manger in Bethlehem fulfills the prophecy of Micah that Bethlehem will be the place where the one who will rule Israel will come forth, the one who “*shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty and the name of the LORD his God ... and he shall be the one of peace*” (Micah 5:4-5a). On Christmas night, the angel appears to the shepherds with the good news that “*to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord*” (Luke 2:11), joined by the angel chorus who sings “*glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!*” (2:14). In our worship gatherings on that silent and holy night, we celebrate the good news that “*the herald angels sing: ‘Glory to the newborn king! Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled.*” The birth of the Prince of Peace seems to hail a new beginning for all people, a time when war shall be no more and “*the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus*” (Philippians 4:7).

Christmas is a holy time in which we may believe that “the pipes of peace” will continue to sound out across the nations; but then we wake up the next morning only to discover that the darkness of violence, hatred, and warfare still scar the world that God created and seeks to reconcile through Christ. There is no clearer example of this than today’s Gospel lesson from Matthew, the horrific story of what the church remembers as the Slaughter of the Holy Innocents, a sad reminder that while the light of God’s love shone brightly on Christmas night, the darkness of hatred and evil have not yet been eradicated. It is a reminder that “*the triumphant proclamation of the new Davidic king in the genealogy and the acceptance of the Christ child, first by Joseph and then by the Gentile Magi, now give way to Herod’s terror, which results in the exile of the holy family and the suffering of many in Israel.*” (Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri). It is a story that begins with the visit of the “*wise men from the East [who] came to Jerusalem, asking, ‘Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising and have come to pay him homage*” (Matthew 2:2). They do not realize that the one to whom they are asking this question will not greet it with gladness, for Herod the Great reigned over Israel not because he was a legitimate heir of the house of David but because of an alliance he made with the Roman Empire. While Herod attempted to placate the population

through his extravagant building programs (including the Second Temple in Jerusalem), he was also known for his ruthlessness and cruelty in maintaining his grasp on power (he even went so far as to kill members of his own family he perceived to be a threat). Matthew tells us that when Herod heard that a “king of the Jews” had been born who would have the legitimacy he lacked, he calls together the religious leaders of the people to inquire of them *“where the Messiah was to be born”* (2:4). When they respond by quoting Micah that it is from Bethlehem that will come *“a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel”* (2:6), Herod summons the Magi and urges them to *“go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may go and pay him homage”* (2:8), knowing full well that to Herod “homage” in this case meant “murder.” But after the Wise Men had found the child in Bethlehem with Mary his mother and offered him their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, *“having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.”* (2:12). Their failure to fulfill Herod’s command will lead to one of the most heinous crimes against humanity in all of Scripture; but before it occurs, an angel of the Lord appears to Joseph again in a dream and instructs the one who had claimed Jesus as his own son to *“get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.”* (2:13). While Egypt was the place where the Israelites were enslaved for centuries until Moses led them out of bondage into freedom, under Roman rule Egypt was a place that was outside of Herod’s jurisdiction and therefore a fitting place for the holy family to seek refuge. Egypt had become a traditional place of refuge for the Jewish people and there was a large Jewish population in the nation, especially in Alexandria. Egypt was also the place where Moses was spared a similar fate in his infancy when Pharaoh commanded that *“every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live”* (Exodus 1:22).

- “As Moses was protected from Pharaoh’s plot to kill the Hebrew male children, so Jesus is saved from Herod’s massacre of the male children by divine intervention. The infant Jesus experiences divine protection from evil rulers of the world because he, like Moses, is destined to save the people of Israel.” – Mitch and Sri.

As he had responded in obedience to the angel’s command to take the child of Mary as his own and name him Jesus (1:25), Joseph obediently acts on the angel’s command: *“Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod”* (2:14-15a). Matthew interprets this as the fulfillment of the prophecy of Hosea: *“Out of Egypt I have called my son.”* (2:15b).

Herod's response to the Magi's disobedience to his command to return after they have found the child fills him with rage and leads to a response that is consistent with the ruthless acts Herod performed near the end of his life: "*When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time he had learned from the wise men.*" (2:16). Historic works from this period do not mention this event, because "*as tragic as these killings would have been, they remain on a smaller scale compared to Herod's other atrocities.*" (Mitch and Sri). Matthew does not sentimentalize the tragedy of the slaughter of these innocent victims or speculate on how the other mothers and fathers in Bethlehem might have interpreted this divine decision to warn only one family, although it has led to a great deal of discussion over the centuries as to how a loving God could allow such a horrific act to occur:

- "In Judeo-Christian traditions, one expects God not to let evildoers prosper and not to let innocent people suffer. When this expectation is not met, the victim or the general public raises the question whether the God who allows such things to happen is just at all ... Jesus would be the only baby whose life was spared because of God's direct intervention, while all the other innocent babies unfortunate enough to be born in Bethlehem around the same time as Jesus perished." – Eugene Park.

While Matthew's attention is fixed on this event as an example found in ancient legends in which a royal child escapes attempts on his life only to return and rule in power, he does acknowledge the horror of this massacre by quoting from Jeremiah 31:15, which pictures Rachel, wife of Jacob and matriarch of the tribes of Benjamin and Ephraim, weeping over the slaughter of her children: "*A voice is heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping over her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more*" 2:18). According to Jeremiah, Ramah was an assembly point for the Babylonian deportation of Judeans after the conquest of Jerusalem ("*The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD after Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard had let him go from Ramah, when he took him bound in fetters along with all the captives of Jerusalem and Judah who were being exiled to Babylon.*" – Jeremiah 40:1). As the wife of the patriarch Jacob/Israel, Rachel represents the great matriarch of Israel, weeping over the death of these innocent children:

- "By summoning the weeping voice of Rachel, the Matthean text symbolically resurrects the then-forgotten voices of the grieving mothers who lost their newborn babies at the hands of Herod. That is something that no other

historian of Matthew's time had done. It is a belated and yet powerful protest against Herod as one of the puppet kings of the Roman Empire ... The cited cry of Rachel is not just a sound of wailing, but it has a clear message. It is a cry for justice that is not being served." – Park.

Herod's slaughter of the holy innocents of Bethlehem is horrific but ultimately futile, for the child he seeks to destroy has survived the massacre by living in exile in Egypt. The death of Herod in 4 BCE was a signal for the holy family to return from refuge among the Gentiles. In another dream, an angel of the Lord instructs Joseph to "*get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead*" (2:20). Displaying the same obedience that is the hallmark of this righteous man, "*Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel*" (2:21), believing that "*Herod's death means it is now safe for Jesus to return to Israel, where he will begin his own saving mission.*" (Mitch and Sri). But it turns out that all is not safe there, for "*Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod*" (2:22) and was as ruthless as his father, so Joseph "*was afraid to go there.*" Again, being obedient to the command of an angel of the Lord in a dream, Joseph leads his family to the "*district of Galilee*" which was not under the rule of Archelaus. Joseph settles his family in Nazareth, a small town that was not known for anything important ("*Can anything good come out of Nazareth?*" – John 1:46). The fact that the Messiah will come from Nazareth is not seen by Matthew as being by chance but is guided by the revelation of God and was already spoken of in Scripture: "*... so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, 'He will be called a Nazorean.'*" (2:23). While this exact quote is found nowhere in the Old Testament, Matthew may have associated "Nazorean" with "Nazirite," the "Holy One of God" found in Judges in reference to Samson ("*No razor is to come on his head, for the boy shall be a Nazirite to God from birth. It is he who shall begin to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines.*" – Judges 13:5). Matthew may also be referring not to a single prophecy but to a larger theme in the prophetic tradition, the theme of the messianic branch ("*A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.*" – Isaiah 11:1). There is a strong tradition in Old Testament prophecy that refers to the messiah-king as "branch" (*netzor*), and this may be what Matthew has in mind in this reference. Since the name of Jesus' hometown on Nazareth is similar to this word for "branch," Matthew is showing how fitting is this that Jesus, the messianic branchy foretold by Isaiah, would be raised in the "branch" town of Nazareth.

- "Matthew looks back on the Christ event as a whole, from his birth through his ministry, crucifixion, resurrection, and the launching of the church and its mission in the world. From Matthew's post-resurrection perspective, the

Christ event involved a threefold movement of divine act, human response, and God's sovereign counterresponse. The meaning of the whole saving drama is anticipated in his presentation of the advent, rejection and the divine reaffirmation of the infant Jesus.” – M. Eugene Boring.

As the Christmas Truce of 1914 did not herald the beginning of a new age in which the “pipes of peace” would replace the cannons of warfare, neither does the birth of the child of Mary in the manger in Bethlehem herald an age in which swords will be beaten into plowshares and peace would reign over all the earth. Our Lord Jesus Christ was born into a world in the throws of darkness, despair, desperation, a world in which the proclamation of the angel was not received as good news by everyone. As Herod did not receive the message of the wise men as a proclamation of “good news of great joy,” so is the Gospel message that Jesus Christ is Lord not received as a gospel message to those who seek to be lords over others. The slaughter of the holy innocents is a tragic reminder of the violence that continues to slaughter innocents around the world, threatening to fill us with despair as we dwell amid thick darkness and the shadow of death. But the good news that is ours who believe that in the birth of Jesus God fulfilled all of God’s promises of a “*light [that] shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it*” (John 1:5) is that in the darkness that enshrouded the streets of Bethlehem and all the world shone “the everlasting light,” so that “*the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.*” (ELW Hymn 279).

- “This is the great joy of which the angel speaks. This is God’s comfort and his surpassing goodness, that we (if we believe) may glory in such a treasure, that Mary be our very mother, Christ our brother, and God our father. For all these things have truly happened that we might believe in them.” – Martin Luther, Sermon for Christmas Day 1522.

The pipes of peace have not replaced the guns of warfare – but one day war will be no more. The slaughter of innocent people continues – but the day will come when death will be no more and all who have suffered will be gathered into the loving presence of God. Christ is born into a world that would massacre innocent children – but in his death and resurrection, Christ defeats the powers of sin and death so that we know that the light that is ours on Christmas Day continues to shine even in the darkest corners of the world, the light that shone in the dark streets of the little town of Bethlehem so that we know that the hope that is ours in God’s promises has been accomplished in the one who has “*come to us, abide with us, our Lord Immanuel!*”

Amen.