

“From Unexpected to Unsafe”  
Hebrews 2:10-18  
Matthew 2:13-23

I am so looking forward to next Sunday when the kids of the church share the Christmas story after worship. Do you know they wrote it themselves? They did! That’s amazing, especially because it’s really hard to find a Christmas pageant that actually works for any given congregation. Because I left the last church I had served as an interim pastor just before I started here in Advent, I had written a Children’s Christmas program for that church which specifically suited the kids involved in Sunday school and their abilities to read or memorize or their desire to simply stand there without any lines at all.

I decided to write it in a “Dear Diary” format from the perspective of Joseph, Mary, and other key people in the Christmas story. As I was rereading the two main Scriptural accounts of the birth of Jesus in Matthew and Luke, I realized how many parts I had to censor. I mean, it’s really cute to have a 10 year old dressed up as Mary—we’re used to seeing it. But how do you have a 10 year old read lines about the Holy Spirit coming upon and overshadowing her, as the angel Gabriel describes? (Luke) Or how do you have Joseph make a journal entry in his diary about how Mary tells him she’s pregnant even though they haven’t had “marital relations,” as the NRSV sterilizes it (Matthew)?

The Christmas story is, well, kind of graphic and not very “G” rated. And then, we make it through Advent and Christmas without focusing too much on the complications, and we get to this passage in Matthew where Herod is about to wipe out all the babies of Bethlehem.

In her book, *Cartographies of Grace (Feminist Theory and Christian Theology)*, Serene Jones tells the following story from her church's annual Christmas pageant:

“At the end of the play... The sound of loud whispering came from the front of the sanctuary. 'Pastor Patricia, I still have something to say'; Lilly was tugging at her pastor's skirt. Although Patricia had just begun the benediction, it was obvious that Lilly, the seven-year-old playing King Herod, was not yet finished. Surprised and a bit curious, the pastor stopped praying and stepped aside, handing the microphone to this very serious-looking child. In a loud, dramatic voice, Lilly spoke to the startled congregation: 'I am King Herod, and I have been watching you. I am going to kill your babies. I hate you.' Across the congregation, smiles vanished. Lilly had reminded us that Jesus' birth was met by the slaughter of innocents, a story we wanted to forget. The service thus ended on an uncomfortably somber note” (Jones, 154).

My theology book club was discussing this book. One of the pastors asked, “What would you have done?”

Silence.

And then mostly the discussion rotated around how we would have avoided this in the first place by not handing the microphone to a seven-year-old.

We pretty much concluded that and moved on with the conversation. Because, really, who wants to dwell on the fact that our Savior's birth precipitated a mass killing of infants?

If it were fiction, it would make a pretty interesting story. Treachery, dreams, murder, exile to Egypt. It reads like biblical soap opera.

But that's the thing about this story. It's not just a wicked first-century soap opera. It is our history. It is our story.

Wise men—astrologers—from the east see a star in the sky—a star that represents a king being born—a king of the Jews. Following that star, they end up in Jerusalem, where they ask the current King, Herod the Great, where the new king has been born. Maybe it was because they were from so far away that they asked this question of a man known for killing his own family members and even rabbis. Maybe they figured Herod himself had recently had a son. Maybe they thought Herod would be happy for his people that the star declared a King of the Jews.

Whatever those wise men thought when they visited Herod, they were dead wrong if they thought Herod was going to be happy with the announcement. Treachery is a big part of this story—first on the part of Herod himself, “A new King... well, how perfectly splendid. Why don't you run along and see where this new king has been born and then come back here to tell me so I can then go and pay him homage.”

The next piece of treachery is from the wise men themselves. Being warned in a dream that Herod is up to no good, the wise men do not return to him but rather head home by a different route.

This is where our story picks up this morning. Joseph is warned in a dream that Herod is about to seek out the baby and destroy him. The angel tells Joseph to take Jesus and Mary to Egypt.

Back at the ranch in Jerusalem, Herod is smoking mad. He's figured out the wise men are not coming back with the precise location of the baby King. And in his anger, Herod strikes out in wrath. If he can't know the exact location, he will simply kill all the babies two years old and younger in the area of Bethlehem, where the prophets had said the descendent of David who would be the Messiah would be born. And he sends out his henchmen to do so.

It's not until Herod dies—estimates vary from months up to three years after the Holy Family leave Bethlehem—that Joseph is visited by another angel in a dream who tells him it's now safe for the family to return to Israel. They head back and settle in Nazareth.

It never ceases to amaze me how much we pretty up Christmas. Our Savior was born in a barn cave. I've been in a cave that has served as a barn near Bethlehem—it is claustrophobically short and well, very cavey—somewhat damp and chilly.

It was not likely that that innkeeper, having all the Roman soldiers and the business travelers in his inn for the census, had that cave neatly cleaned ahead of time either. It probably smelled. It probably had a LOT of animals in it—like a small herd of sheep, actually, so it was likely very crowded. And when you are noisy around sheep, which I can only imagine how noisy it was for Mary to be giving birth to her firstborn, sheep get skittish and noisy in return.

And then after being born in a cave, Jesus' life is soon threatened. His family is forced to flee to Egypt. Babies die because of Herod's fear of him. It's a mess, really.

A mess that is important for us to sit with for awhile. A mess that is an important part of our story. Because without the mess, without the humanity of it all, it would feel a lot more like fiction. It would feel a lot less like a story that could be anything but our own.

Isaiah writes, "He became their savior in all their distress. It was no messenger or angel but his presence that saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them."

What would happen if Jesus had just randomly appeared as a grown-up—no history, no childhood, no crazy background, like some sort of an angel? It just wouldn't work.

We need the history, because we each have a history and a story we know of our lives unfolding. We need the reality of it, because each of us lives in the real world of fear and love and treachery and death. We need to hear again that Jesus' life was not a fairy tale but a real background, flesh and blood included—because our lives include the flesh and blood and grit of living.

God wants a relationship with us. God wants to be in conversation with you in prayer and through your reading of Scripture. Not just on Sunday mornings but every morning. That is why Jesus comes to us in our distress—not as something magical but as a human being.

And two thousand years ago when God had tried to connect with humans in pillars of fire and a presence in the tabernacle, by giving the law and leading people out of Egypt, in the Temple and in some amazing battles, God finally decided maybe all that wasn't working quite right and it was time to try something entirely different to keep a connection with us. And God came to us in our distress not as an angel but as a human presence.

You may have read this story—it gets sent around via the web now and then, though the author is unknown. It is about a man who didn't believe in the incarnation or the spiritual meaning of Christmas, and was skeptical about God. He and his family lived in a farm community. His wife was a devout believer and diligently raised her children in her faith. The man sometimes gave her a hard time about her faith and mocked her religious observance of Christmas.

One snowy Christmas eve she was taking the kids to the Christmas eve service at church. She pleaded with him to come, but he firmly refused. He ridiculed the idea of the incarnation of Christ and dismissed it as nonsense. "*Why would God lower himself and become a human like us?! It's such a ridiculous story!*" he said. So she and the children left for church while he stayed home.

After they left, the winds grew stronger and the snow turned into a blizzard. As he looked out the window, all he saw was a blinding snowstorm.

Then he heard a loud thump, something hitting against the window. And another thump. He looked out the window but couldn't see, so he trekked outside to see what was going on. In the field near his house he saw a flock of geese caught in the snow storm. They were lost and stranded on his farm, with no food or shelter, fluttering their wings and flying around in circles around the field.

He had compassion for them and wanted to help them. Realizing they could stay in the barn for the night, he walked over and opened the barn doors for them. He waited, watching them, hoping they would notice the open doors and go inside. But they just fluttered around not noticing the barn or realize what it could mean for them. He started whistling and calling to them. Nothing. He moved closer toward them to get their attention, but of course they just moved away from him out of fear.

He went into the house and came back out with some bread, broke it up, and made a bread trail leading to the barn. They still didn't catch on. Frustrated, he went over and tried to shoo them, run after them, and chase them toward the barn. They only became more scared and scattered into every direction except toward the barn.

None of his attempts to get them into the barn succeeded. Nothing he did could get them where there was warmth, safety, and shelter; nothing he did could make them enter the one place where they could survive.

Feeling totally frustrated, he wished the geese would listen and follow him into the barn. But he knew that they just wouldn't follow a human. He actually thought to himself, *"The only way would be for me to become a goose. Then I could show them the way! They would follow me, not fear me. They would trust me, and I could lead them to safety."*

You can imagine the epiphany that unfolded in his mind as he thought about wanting to become a goose and then he thought of his earlier conversation with his wife, his word echoing in his head:

*"Why would God want to be like us? That's so ridiculous!"*

And finally he began to understand the incarnation of Christmas.

May his epiphany be our epiphany this Christmas season—understanding God's love for us to become one of us.

Thanks be to God!