

THE MANGER AND THE CROSS

A Sermon by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

Matthew 2:1-8, 13-18

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Back a number of years ago, a community church was asked to set up a "seasonal display" for Christmas in the town's shopping center. Of course, a committee was formed, and they got to work. They built a display that featured a movie screen. Above the screen were words taken from the familiar Christmas carol, "Good Christian Men" or as we more commonly know it today, "Good Christian Friends." The words displayed above the screen were, "*Christ was born for this, Christ was born for this!*" So, while the hymn played continuously in the background, slides of scenes from current events flashed up on the screen - scenes of war, poverty, hunger, homelessness flashed across the screen. The message of the display was clear, "Christ was born for this, Christ was for us, Christ was born for now."

After only two days, the management of the shopping center called the church and demanded that the display be removed because the merchants felt the message was depressing and bad for business. The opinion was that "people don't want to think about stuff like that at Christmas." I think we understand the merchants' point of view; perhaps it's our own point of view. When it comes to celebrating Christmas, we prefer to focus on beautiful decorations, joyful music, delicious cookies, family gatherings and the special traditions that are near and dear to our hearts.

Today, three days after Christmas, our celebration of Jesus' birth continues. As long as there are no concerns about the health of a baby, the occasion of that child's birth is a cause for great joy and ongoing celebration. And in the days following birth, older brothers and sisters are excited to meet their new little brother or sister. Grandparents and other relatives arrive expecting to have their turn holding the baby. Pictures are taken and sent so that others may also rejoice in and celebrate the baby's arrival.

It is a truly joyful time, and yet it is also the beginning of worrisome and even frightening times. For despite the joy of the young parents, there are also bills to pay, clothes to be bought, sports and activity expenses that will add up, as well as further education that will need to be financed. There will be times of sickness when parents are up all night, pacing the floor and frightened, not sure what to do to make their baby feel better. There will be accidents, falls, bumps, bruises, cuts and possible even a trip or two to the emergency room. There will be fights, misunderstandings, as well as angry and hurtful words that cut to the heart. There will be difficult, frustrating and painful times.

You hold a beautiful little baby in your arms, and you cherish him, you're your heart overflows with love for her. But then there are also the other days when you will walk the floor into the night, filled with anxiety as you wait for that now grown baby to get back home and to be safe. You will, as one woman said, "wear out your knees in prayer" when that little one becomes sixteen and begins to drive a car. There will be disappointments, paths taken and those not taken.

The presence of children in our lives is our greatest joy, and yet they are also the most expensive, worrisome gifts we'll ever receive. So, when that new baby arrives, we hold him in our arms, cherishing and enjoying her because there will be other days, not so joyful days.

Christmas focuses our attention on Jesus' birth, a beautiful story about Mary and Joseph traveling to Bethlehem, and then Mary giving birth to the Christ child and placing him in a manger. The Christmas story is about the birth of God's Son, and "good tidings of great joy." It's about shepherds going to Bethlehem and finding a child lying in a manger and then expressing their praise to God. The Christmas story is about the wisemen from the East who saw a rising star and who then searched for the one who was born to be a king. This is the Christmas story we look forward to hearing year after year.

And yet, year after year in the Gospel of Matthew, we also come across someone else in the Christmas story - someone we would rather avoid, because he simply spoils the beauty and joy of Jesus' birth. That person is King Herod, the ruling authority in that region where Jesus was born. His ancestry is Jewish, but he is basically a puppet ruler for Caesar and the Roman occupying force. Herod's palace was in Jerusalem, which is only about six miles north of the town of Bethlehem. The wisemen who came from a country east of Israel, mistakenly thought that someone of great importance, someone destined to be "the king of the Jews" would be born in a big, important city like Jerusalem. And so the wisemen stop first in Jerusalem to inquire. They ask to see King Herod, because it makes complete sense that a king would know about important occurrences in the area in which he ruled.

But Herod apparently knew nothing about the birth of a King until asked by the wisemen, "*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). This inquiry from the wisemen happened about two years after Jesus' birth and the wisemen's first observance of the new star. About two years appears to be the time it took the wisemen to do their research, and to then pack up, leave and travel west to Jerusalem. As Herod heard about the birth of a child born to be king of the Jews, his gut response was not joy but fear. Terror filled Herod's heart, because he was the established king of the Jews. A baby born to be king of the Jews was a threat to his power and authority. The wisemen wanted to see and pay homage to baby Jesus, but all Herod could think about doing was eliminating the threat.

So after sharing with the wisemen the prophet Micah's prophecy, "*And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel...*" (Matthew 2:6), Herod sends them ahead to Bethlehem to find the child. He also asks the wisemen to send word back to him after they find the child so that he "*may also go and pay him homage*" (Matthew 2:8). Of course, Herod had no intention of paying homage to a child who threatened his power. God knew Herod's heart and so God warned both the wisemen and Joseph in two separate dreams. Therefore, following the presentation of their gifts to Jesus, the

wiseman left Bethlehem and headed straight back home, and Joseph, Mary and Jesus left Bethlehem and headed straight to Egypt.

And how did Herod respond? Herod responded with orders to kill "*all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wisemen*" (Mt. 2:16). Herod was well known in his day to respond harshly to threats. During his rule, he murdered anyone he considered a threat, including his wife, his mother-in-law and even one of his own sons. And this time, he murdered innocent babies in and around Bethlehem. It's almost surprising how "matter of fact" the Bible shares this brutal event. One moment we are amidst the lovely happenings of Christmas, and then suddenly, there is a King killing babies.

It doesn't seem appropriate that a crazed king should be a part of the story at all. And yet, the message is very clear: Jesus was born into a world of violence, a world of hate-filled tyrants, a world where power and greed is the sword that rules above all else. It was a world where people in power killed when threatened – a world where such people stopped at nothing to get what they wanted – a world where such people were completely oblivious to the innocent who are harmed in the process. Christ was born to a people who longed for a day when the Messiah would come to deliver them from the hands of hate-filled oppressive kings like Herod.

That same world continues to be a familiar world for us today. Too often, violence continues to rule the day, and children continue to be innocent victims in the struggle between political regimes. Could there be anything more wrong, more atrocious than innocent children suffering because of politics and war? A terrorist's bomb kills a young child... bombs are dropped in Ukraine on the homes of families who are simply living their lives and trying to survive... a gunman enters a university of higher education and kills indiscriminately... None of it should happen, children should never be innocent victims of power struggles and political conflicts. And yet, over the centuries, it seems that not much has changed. Today, our King Herods go by other names, and our weapons are so much more efficient and impactful. We may try to convince ourselves that our motives are more sophisticated and noble than in the past, but what is most clear is that the spirit of Herod is alive and well. Despite all our technological innovation, and our advancements in education, medicine, and communications, there is a lot that is wrong with the world that has not changed.

In some ways, I wish that Matthew the gospel writer left out this part of his Christmas story. Surely, no one would have raised a fuss if he left it out, and so I wonder if he might have been tempted to do just that. After all, the other gospels make no mention of the incident. Why not just leave out this gruesome detail, so that nothing bad could be associated with something as good as Jesus' birth? Well, perhaps he could have, and yet, I don't think Matthew's intent was to create a fairy tale story. Matthew wanted to show us that Christ was born into the real world with all its gruesome details included. The world into which Christ was born is our world, a sometimes terrible and violent world. And not only did Christ live among all of this, he was born for all of this.

A certain church, like many churches at this time of the year, loved to display poinsettias in the sanctuary at Christmas. One year there was an unusually high number of poinsettias ordered. There were so many plants in fact that when they were delivered the committee responsible for displaying them was having a difficult time finding enough space for all of them in the sanctuary. They placed the potted plants wherever they could find space like on the piano, on the steps and on the altar itself. When they stepped back to look upon the fine display of red-leaved poinsettias, they noticed that the plants placed on the altar were placed in such a way that they almost completely obscured the cross. Unlike this church that has a large hanging cross above the altar, many churches have a cross that sits on top of their altar. Therefore, larger plants placed on the altar can very easily obscure one's ability to see the cross. But upon realizing that the cross could not be seen, one person said, "Don't worry, this is Christmas. We don't need to see the cross at this time."

At this time of the year, we might prefer to focus on beautiful poinsettias rather than a cross. And yet, the cross makes sense all year round, including at Christmas. We may not like to think about it at this time, but Jesus was born to die on a cross. The manger and the cross are very closely connected. Jesus was born in a stable and laid in a manger, but his life would end on a cross. The journey that began in the little town of Bethlehem ended on a hill outside the gates of Jerusalem. Even at Christmas, we cannot forget the reality of Good Friday, because our world is filled with that reality.

Our joy at Christmas is not simply that Christ was born, but that Jesus lived among us and confronted the very worst about us, and then he willingly died for us on a cross. This means that our Christmas joy is not an annual fantasy trip to a place where all our Christmas wishes come true even though much of the music and holiday programming seem to encourage our belief in such a place. Our Christmas joy is a result of God's love. God's love for us led God to become Emmanuel, God with us, God born among us as one of us – looking, feeling, living and dying like one of us.

This morning, we are reminded that the manger and the cross cannot be separated into different seasons, because they exist side by side. It's only been three days since the angel announced Jesus' birth to the shepherds, and we have gathered in this sanctuary once again to remember and celebrate the joy of Christ coming among us. But it's not possible to celebrate the joy of Jesus' birth without acknowledging the reality of his death on a cross. For if we are to be saved, God had to do something about the sinfulness of our confusion, our cruelty, and our fear. The birth of a Savior gives rise to a deep and lasting joy that is able to confront the heartache of this world because it is rooted in our connection with God regardless of our life circumstances. It is rooted in our conviction that no matter what happens, God is with us and loves us. Yes, we may sometimes feel overwhelmed and defeated by life, but God can never be defeated.

So, my message today, on this Sunday after Christmas when we've been reminded of the awful realities that describe life in this world is to declare to you, "*Christ was born for this!*" Thanks be to God! Amen.