

The Other Half of Christmas

The holidays are a time of traditions. From watching Santa arrive at the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade to favorite Christmas dishes, traditions define our time together during Christmas. One of my family's traditions is to read the Nativity story on Christmas eve. We read it from the same old family Bible that's been passed down from generation to generation. My dad turns to Luke, and in a quiet voice begins to read...

We never read about this, though. Partly, that's because in Luke the next scene we are offered is Jesus' circumcision then, bam, he's teaching in the temple. Luke also offers a much tidier ending. "But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart."¹ That's nice.

Matthew, however, is hardly as neat. Matthew presents a more frantic story; and while we like to read the birth narrative reverently and calmly, there are some pretty anxious moments in Matthew's version of events. We all know the first part: Mary finds out (by way of an Angel, mind you) that she's pregnant even though she has done nothing that might make her with child. Joseph is visited in a dream by an angel encouraging him to stay with his wife who is expecting a baby that isn't his. The baby is born in a cowshed out back behind an inn as a star rises above that is brighter and bigger than any other star that night. Shepherds somehow make their way to see the newborn child. So do wise men who bring a wealth of gifts. For an instant, there is a Kodak moment of Christmas perfection.

Then things get even crazier, according to Matthew. Joseph gets this intense dream where an angel says "Hey, listen up Joe, get the kid and haul it to Egypt. Herod's out to get him." And Joseph does as he's told and uproots his family for Egypt (the land that enslaved his people generations before—just so we're clear). And, with the holy family safely stowed in a far off land, Herod proceeds to kill all the boys under the age of two in the region around Bethlehem in an attempt to thwart any sort of revolutionary child king. And Rachel weeps for her children. Jesus is saved.

This is the other half of Christmas. And it's a hard half to confront. Right before my final exams began, I first glanced at the gospel lection for today. "The Massacre of the Infants," it read or "the slaughter of the innocents" as Dan called it, jumped at me. It seemed rather appropriate at that point of my first semester of school. "Oh," I thought, "I can just talk about seminary finals, then."

I read more closely, though, and realized just what a challenge lay before me. Here I am: twenty-two and barely a semester into my theological education and I am being asked to discuss quite possibly one of the most theologically challenging passages in the Bible. It's challenging because it forces us to fundamentally wonder about the nature of a God that would allow the death of children for the sake of his own. It makes us question the

¹ Luke 2: 19, NRSV

notion of a savior that would run while not warning others to flee as well, or of a God that wouldn't make that part of the plan.

And I had to wonder, "Am I old enough for this?" That question has been the common denominator of the past six months. Am I old enough to have a mortgage? Or a cat? Am I old enough for my friends to be getting married? Am I old enough to be fixing the tiles that crumbled off my shower? Or to be receiving major kitchen appliances for Christmas?

And beyond the little changes have been much larger ones. Twice a week, I don my security ID and make my rounds on Four East at Scottish Rite Children's Hospital in Atlanta. Rarely are there patients that have been there for more than a few days. So my time is spent making initial visits to patients and families, and attempting to assist them in some way. Mostly, after I go into a room and introduce myself as a chaplain (talk about wondering if you're old enough...), the families politely answer a few questions then indirectly or, sometimes painfully directly, let me know it's time to go. But every once and while, someone opens up. A young parent wants to know why this is happening to their child? If it was something they did? They want to know why bad things happen, or why God lets the innocent become ill. And I stand in those rooms, with these people bearing their souls to me and I want to say "You know I'm twenty-two, in my first semester of seminary and barely making a B in Hebrew, right?"

But that isn't their concern. Their concern is finding a way to get through the ordeal they are facing, and they want me to help them.

I think Mary and Joseph might have felt the same way. I can imagine Joseph thinking "Am I old enough to be taking my family to Egypt?" Mary might wonder "Am I old enough to be a mother?" We all question our own preparedness in the world around us. Somehow, I don't think you ever feel old enough.

But hear the good news of the story! This, the other half of Christmas, is the promise coming to life. Until this point, the story has been grand—angels and singing, shepherds, magi and gifts. The promise is said to have been fulfilled.

But if we journey with the story as though it is the first time we've heard it, we don't know that yet. We don't know about Lazarus coming back to life or the sick being made well. We haven't gotten to the part where Christ walks on water or feeds a hillside of hungry followers.

We just have a manger, a new mother and father, a small child and an angry king. The flight to Egypt and the mere survival of Christ, then, is a morsel of promise made real in an otherwise fairy-tale of a story.

And in this morsel of survival is a world of truth and hope and certainty in the midst of the most uncertain times much like the ones we live in now.

Like Rachel we weep for the brokenness of this world. We cry out when it seems that good has been slaughtered by evil. We tremble when we witness the destruction of war and famine and drought.

I think about my patient Bobby. The four-year old had been admitted to the hospital with an abdominal wound which came from his brother who stabbed him (accidentally) with a box cutter while playing power rangers. I sat with Bobby for 3 hours or so, playing candy land, watching power rangers, and talking about what he wanted for Christmas. He knew he was being released later that day, so he talked about home, and how he was ready to “get out of this town.” What he didn’t know was that the Department of Family and Children Services would be picking him up. He would be leaving the hospital, but he wouldn’t be going home.

And I wept for Bobby as I left that day. I felt like I had abandoned him like everyone else had in his life. I was angry at a society that would let a child be harmed like he was. I was angry at the God that didn’t protect him.

Don’t you see, this is the other half of Christmas—It’s a shot of reality in an otherwise fairytale experience. And in the midst of that harsh truth, there is the light of the fact that the Christ lived through trying times, and suffered with us so we might be able to survive this world.

This is the joy of the other half of Christmas—we can make it. God is indeed with us, because as the author of Hebrews reminds us, Christ has suffered along side us. And for this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call us brothers and sisters.²

The Nativity isn’t just a pleasant little tale that weaves a story around angels and sheep.

It is a promise made real.

Amen.

² Hebrews 2: 11b, NRSV