

THE NATIVITIES



Matthew 2:1 "In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?'"

The tone of the story of Jesus' birth as told in the Gospel of Matthew is very, very different from the more familiar story in Luke's Gospel. On Christmas Eve each year, we hear Luke's version of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem. In those days, we are told, a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. All traveled to their own towns to be enrolled. Joseph went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem. --- It is a quiet and simple story. Mary and Joseph huddling in a humble stable because there was no room for them in the inn. Their baby wrapped in swaddling

clothes and laid in a manger. Lowly shepherds, who were keeping their flocks by night on neighboring hillsides, are told by an angel of the birth, and go off to Bethlehem in haste to see this thing that has happened. When they find the baby Jesus, they make known what had been told them about this child by the angel; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said. And Mary, told, treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds then return to their fields, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. --- This narrative of Jesus' birth in Luke's Gospel is one of the most peaceful moments in all of the Scriptures: a gathering of angels and simple shepherds celebrating the "good news" and "great joy" of the birth of a baby "wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger." Our quiet singing of "Silent Night" upon our knees in candlelight here on Christmas Eve may be the most appropriate reflection of the spirit of Luke's account of Jesus' birth.

But the story as told in Matthew's Gospel has a very different feel to it, and sadly we only hear it when there is a Second Sunday After Christmas Day, as there is this year. After rehearsing Jesus' genealogy in chapter 1, we are told in Matthew's account that Mary was found to be with child, and that Joseph, her betrothed, planned to divorce her, quietly, but just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and encouraged him to accept the child as his own.

Then exotic Wise Men from the East arrive in Jerusalem and innocently ask King Herod "where is the child who has been born King of the Jews?" This was very threatening news to King Herod, that there was another who claimed to be King of the Jews, whom others from far off lands had come to hail. Indeed we are told in the Scriptures that *all* Jerusalem was frightened by this news. Herod then ordered the chief priests and scribes to the royal palace so that he could demand of them to know where the Messiah was to be born. Then Herod secretly called for the wise men again and learned from them the exact time that the star had appeared. Herod then encouraged the Wise Men to go and search diligently for the child in Bethlehem of Judea and then let him know when they have found him, so that he, King Herod, might come too and pay him homage. On entering the home in Bethlehem over which the star had settled, the Wise Men saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and worshipped him. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road. Then Joseph is warned in a dream to take Mary and the child and flee, flee to Egypt --- and so the Holy Family quickly escapes out of town under the cover of darkness. When Herod realizes that he has been tricked by the Wise Men, he orders the slaughter of the innocents, the murder in Bethlehem of all children under the age of two. This, we are told, is to fulfill what had been spoken

through the prophet Jeremiah: "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." The Holy Family returns to Israel later, only after Herod has died, and settle instead in Galilee for fear of Archelaus who succeeded Herod as the ruler of Judea.

Thus the feel of Jesus' birth in Matthew's account is very different from Luke's. Here the story is threatening. Here there is fear and anxiety, distrust, political maneuvering, and cold-blooded murder. There is tension and destruction and lamentation, the wailing of women over the death of their children. This account is not a quiet and peaceful silent night, but a chaotic and horrific struggle for power and control, not exactly the "good news" and "great joy" shared by the lowly shepherds.

Indeed these two stories, perhaps reflect the two most common views of religion in our world. Luke portrays the story in a good light, on the side of the common people, acting in humility and peace, pondering all these things in their hearts and what they might mean. There are no rumors of war, no clashing armies, only a bright and blessed calm on a quiet silent night in a far off place, in this view of the birth of Jesus.

On the other hand, there is a view of religion that sees it as dangerous. Killing in the name of God is not a new thing in history, and nothing does more to discredit faith than killing in the name of religion. Believers regularly argue, however, that

religion is often simply invoked as a cover to justify violence carried out for reasons of politics, economics and power that have nothing to do with God. And there is some truth to this --- and also to the idea that in the 20th century, secular forms of totalitarianism unleashed mass murder on an unprecedented scale, like the Holocaust in Europe or the genocide in Armenia. Still Religion often finds itself a source of violence, and hatred, and distrust and among many not inclined toward those things, religion is seen as a dangerous social medium.

Too often in the history of religion, the faithful have killed --- in the name of the God of life. Too often in the history of religion, the faithful have waged war --- in the name of the God of peace. They have hated in the name of the God of love and practiced cruelty in the name of the God of compassion, one need only remember the Crusades or the Troubles in Ireland or the Protestant wars on the continent, or the caliphate of the Islamic State to know this is true.

I believe in the end that religion and politics are inherently different activities, even though many of the genuinely ethical norms that religious people bring to public life are rooted in their faith. Nonetheless, religion is at its best when it relies on the strength of argument and example. And it is at its worst when it seeks to impose truth by force.

And the strength of example must mean that those who preach religious peace and toleration and love of neighbor must actually

practice these virtues. We must strive for justice and peace, root out prejudice and hate, and witness to love and compassion, and comfort the poor and the frightened, and welcome the stranger.

Cardinal Sean O'Malley, the archbishop of Boston, argued once that "One of the most pernicious effects of terrorism is that it can instill prejudices and group hatred in people's hearts and minds." One thinks of radical Islam in the Middle East these days or racial protests over civil rights in our own country. "All of us are horrified by the evil perpetrated by radical terrorists," said O'Malley, "but we must not let their inhumanity rob us of our humanity."

Cardinal O'Malley also issued a warning that "Fear can cause us to do terrible and stupid things." Thus there is an important lesson in the Christmas story today that, God willing, we will all learn. As we mull over the current debate in this country about systemic racism, radical political divides, foreign and domestic terrorists, and the plight of refugees and immigrants around the world, let us remember that doors were closed in the face of Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem; that the Holy Family had to flee for their very lives from terrible violence, and had to live in Egypt for years as exiles, as foreigners in an alien land, and then we afraid to return home thereafter. Thus while we ask our leaders to be vigilant and protect our citizens, we must also in the name of our religion, not turn our backs on so many innocent

people suffering around the world, people who are hungry, homeless, hurting, fearful, oppressed and often without a country or people to protest them, people who are fleeing from violence like Mary and Joseph did. To see the other side of this story, to defend other people, to stand on the side of the oppressed and against hatred and prejudice, not despite our tradition but because of it, that is the heart of Christianity. Amen.