

Sermon: The True Christmas Spirit**Scripture: Matthew 2****Preacher : Rev. Will Burhans****Date: January 7, 2018**

... and that is how the Christmas story ends. Just in case your experience of Christmas this year was not wonderful but had difficult moments because of tension in the family or bad news that came during the holidays or stress that was ramped up, I hope you understand that the struggle and the pain are equally a part of the Christmas spirit. Not according to our culture, I realize, but according to the actual story, it's not all sweetness and light.

And just in case your holidays were marked by anger, frustration, and even fear over the tax reform passed by Congress because it seems to benefit the wealthy and threaten the underprivileged, I just want to remind you that that too is part of the Christmas spirit, at least as far as our scriptures tell it. Narcissistic Herod, using his position and power to ensure and increase his own position and power by way of lies and manipulations no matter the cost to those around him is right there in the story just days after that silent night, holy night when all was calm and all was bright. King Herods are alive and well in the leadership of our own Empire, on both sides of the aisle, not just securing their own privilege at others' expense but also abusing their power in the mistreatment of those, especially women, under them. Our feeling shocked and galled by any or all of that is being in the Christmas spirit.

As the King Herods are alive and well in our day so are the terrified holy families who scramble for safety and protection for their

children and seek refuge in other places and other lands. Thankfully Egypt hadn't built a wall to keep refugees and immigrants out of their country or Mary, Joseph and the infant Jesus would have perished long before Jesus' work could be done. I wonder how receptive the Egyptian citizenry were to the holy family, if hostile stares and gestures met them because of their language or clothes or customs. I wonder if Joseph had a hard time finding work there because he did not belong. Such fear and strife in the experience of refugees and immigrants right here in 2018, also is a measure of the Christmas spirit.

As is outright violence and blood-shed, apparently. When Herod realized his lies and manipulations of the magi – “go and find the child, the King of the Jews, and tell me where he is so that I may go and worship him!” – when he realized his manipulations were not working he stopped mincing words and simply initiated an all-out assault, a massacre to snuff out those he did not favor. Even the slaughter of innocent children was not too high a price to be paid for his needs and desires. That's also part of the Christmas spirit alive and well in our modern day empires whether you consider President Assad in Syria or the gun violence in our streets and homes that many of our own little ruling Herods are unwilling to address in any meaningful way for fear of how it will effect their power and position.

The Christmas spirit, the essence of the greatest story ever told is only half-expressed at best by beautiful scenes on a peaceful night. The inhumanity of humanity, the wickedness of man, the corruptible nature of money and power, the violence of Empires is in great measure a part of the the spirit of Christmas as well.

Otherwise, there would be no need of the Christ Child's coming. For the truth of the matter is that we live in a sinful and broken world that is in need of saving. That's why Jesus came. But what's apparent, is that his coming didn't involve the immediate salvation of our world but rather his coming was the beginning of a saving rescue mission. He came to recruit us for the mission of salvation. Lord knows there were many people who weren't thrilled by this approach. They were counting on the Messiah, when he came, to kick some Roman Empire butt, save the chosen, and punish and discard the un-chosen. But that is decidedly NOT how it went.

Instead God began in Jesus Christ a long and arduous process of world renewal one heart at a time and here we are 2000 years later with that all still unfolding. This is why in the Christmas spirit we say the Christ Child continues to come and be born in our hearts year after year. And if he is born in our hearts, if we are in Christ and Christ is in us as the Apostle Paul says, then in His Spirit we are challenged to respond to the Herods and Pilates of this world with Christ-like confrontation or Christ-like silent resistance. And we are recruited to respond to the struggle and suffering of holy families around us today who are poor and refugees and feeling the weight of unjust systems with Christ-like love and Christ-like advocacy. And we are to remember in the struggles and sufferings of our own lives, that it's right there in that personal strife too that God tends to come, not when its all happy and peaceful and light but God comes into the mess of our dysfunction and fear and painful inadequacies to shine a light and love us forth into something new.

In the Spirit of the season, may Christ empower you to face your own demons and the demons of this world with his strength and his peace so that you can be transformed in His light and contribute to the transforming of the world that it may become eventually and truly a place of silent and holy nights, of peace on the earth and good will towards all, Amen!

Invitation to Communion

Communion itself is gathering at the table, it's being fed, an expression of love and unity and all those good things... but this sacrament too is not a fantasy thing, it also squarely faces in broken bread and the cup, the reality of brokenness and division and hurt in this world. Jesus, the very incarnation of God, was betrayed by those he loved, abandoned by his friends, in agony over whether he had to follow his painful path, imprisoned and executed by the state, thereby bringing God into those very places that seem most God-forsaken. All of this is contained in this sacrament. So, you see, as you bring yourself to this table, there is nothing that you bring with you nor is there any lack that you fail to bring with you that should keep you from having a place here. Jesus himself did not have a place here among us and by inhabiting that no-man's land, he made a place for everyone. So everyone, everyone is welcome here. And I might add if you choose not to partake that is fine too and you are welcome here as well. We only invite you to participate by being prayerful in this time and passing the plate to your neighbor as it comes. In preparation, let us sing together "O Morning Star, How Fair and Bright" - #145 in PH - because this second verse in particular is such a beautiful prayer for us to sing to prepare our hearts for this sacrament: "Thou heavenly brightness, light divine! O deep within my heart now shine, and make thee there and altar. Fill me with joy and strength to be thy member, ever joined to thee in love that cannot falter; toward thee, longing doth possess me, turn and bless me, here in sadness, eye and heart long for thy gladness." Let us sing.