

Ecclesiastes 3:1-11
Revelations 21: 1-6
Matthew 2: 13-23

“Resolved”
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How soon we leave the warm cocoon of that night in the stable. How soon the songs of the angels fade and the impressive visitors leave. In spite of the majestic and miraculous series of events with which Matthew leads us to Bethlehem, we are now confronted with cold reality. This baby has not been born into a safe world.

Matthew tells us the Christmas story in a particular way because he wants to show the link between Jesus and the traditions of the Hebrew people. So the saving of this special baby echoes Moses' rescue from Pharaoh's order to kill all Hebrew boy babies. And the flight to Egypt means that Jesus' formative years will be spent there, just as the Hebrew people were formed out of a refugee experience. Rachel, who died in Bethlehem, was one of the wives of Jacob, and was the ancestress of the northern tribes of Israel. And Matthew remembers that she was said to mourn when those tribes were killed and enslaved by enemy armies. So she cries again when the mothers and children of Bethlehem become the focus of a king's savage demonstration of power.

This is the most difficult part of the Christmas story, isn't it? According to historians, Herod, the puppet king of Judea, was just as cruel and paranoid and insane as our reading suggests. This act of fury and fear was only one of many: Herod had already ordered the assassination of three of his own sons, his mother-in-law and his beloved wife Mariamne out of fear and jealousy. The “permanent solution” for getting rid of a possible rival king or Messiah in Bethlehem was just another action of a man who had power and was willing to use it. The world of Jesus' birth was one of injustice, oppression, and senseless violence. And so once again, says Matthew, Rachel's tears fall in grief. The Gospel writer uses these “fulfillment” texts frequently, but the text makes clear that this event was not ordained by God -- it was ordered by Herod. These acts are not “fulfillment” of God's desires. Instead, they are natural outcomes of human fear, power seeking, anger, and evil.

Mary, Joseph and Jesus just manage to escape with their lives. They go as refugees to the ancient place of slavery and shame, Egypt. I can imagine that Mary also wept in fear and uncertainty on that journey of terror. And we all know the end of the story: Jesus will face the powers that control Judea again in thirty years, and then they will manage to kill him. Mary will weep once again.

Mothers still weep today in places of war: places like Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, the Sudan, Palestine. Mothers still weep when their children suffer and die needlessly from disease or hunger. Even though no Herod rules in Judea, the echoes of the bereft mother's tears still touch us. The light and shadow of history, the tragedy and triumph, the virtue and the evil, continue to run through our lives in rapid succession.

So does this mean that the beautiful night of stars and shepherds and angels was all for nothing? Did that birth do anything to change the world? Why are we here, the week after Christmas?

We are here because we believe that the life of the baby Jesus was precious, and that his life and teaching and suffering and death and resurrection has meaning for us. Not because the world lost its leaning towards violence, but because we were shown another way. Jesus and his companions gave us a vision of how to live in the face of injustice and fear. As UCC Pastor Kate Huey writes, “Archelaus and Herod are tyrants whose days came to an end. Jesus, the baby whose goodness and power so threatened the tyrants of old, still unsettles and provokes a reaction in those who use their power for their own gain. Perhaps you or someone you know (or someone who inspires you) has experienced suffering for standing up to the powers that be. How is God still speaking, calling you to stand up and speak the truth to these powers today? What might be the cost, and are you ready and willing to pay it?”

In the early middle ages, the Church celebrated several feast days immediately after Christmas. Last Monday would be the Feast of Saint Stephen (the early church’s first martyr), the next day would be the Feast of Saint John the Evangelist (also called the beloved disciple), and the next day would be the Feast of the Holy Innocents, remembering those babies who died so senselessly in Bethlehem. This disparate group was called the ‘Comites Christi’: the companions of Christ. They were given this place of honor, close to Christmas, because there was seen to be a special connection between them and Jesus. The first martyr, the beloved friend, the innocent victims: these are the companions of the Christ we follow.

What would it mean for us to join those companions? Perhaps our response to the story of the flight of the holy family and the slaughter of the small children would be to do what we can to make sure that families are not driven from their homes, and that children are kept safe from violence. If the coming of Christ changed anything in this world, it would have to be the hearts and hands of people. The only weapon we are given is the weapon of Love: a strong, unquenchable Love. Jesus could touch his friends in such a way so that they would not pick up a sword, but rather devote themselves to healing. Jesus could touch us in such a way that we would not tolerate abuse of power. Just as God promises to wipe the tear from each weeping eye, we could devote ourselves to drying the tears of all those weeping mothers.

Herod reminds us of the dark side of the Bible story. He reminds us that Christ did not come into a time of holiday cheer and warm feelings. He entered a world of real pain. In spite of the worship of the wise men, Jesus was born an outcast, homeless, and eventually the victim of political power. So he is the most fitting savior for outcasts, refugees, and people whom others don’t notice. His first followers may have been like us, in some ways: not necessarily the best and strongest, but those who in their weakness become a sign for the world of the wisdom and power of God. God’s power shines in the darkest night: even in the flight from Bethlehem. The coming of Jesus does not mean escape from suffering. Suffering is clearly all around us. But God can move us to work against the forces of destruction, God can teach us to say no to the Herods of our time.

On this New Year’s Day, the season of new beginnings, the day of resolutions, we can resolve together. Just as Joseph resolved to stay close to Mary and Jesus, to protect them, to make extraordinary journeys with them and on behalf of them, we can see the Christ child’s face in each person in need, hear the infant Jesus in each cry of pain and despair. Perhaps we need an angel to visit us in our dreams, to say, “Fear not!” and tell us which way to go.

So in the days following Christmas, let us resolve to remember the power of Love in the face of pain. Let us offer our hands to help the helpless, and to wipe away Rachel's tears.

Hear this responsive affirmation of faith from South Africa:

1: It is **not** true that this world and its inhabitants are doomed to die and be lost;

2: This **is** true: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only son so that everyone who believes in him shall not die, but have everlasting life."

1: It is **not** true that we must accept inhumanity and discrimination, hunger and poverty, death and destruction;

2: This **is** true: "I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

1: It is **not** true that violence and hatred shall have the last word, and that war and destruction have come to stay forever;

2: This **is** true: "For unto us a child is born, to us a son is given, in whom authority will rest, and whose name will be Prince of Peace."

1: It is **not** true that we are simply victims of the powers of evil that seek to rule the world;

2: This **is** true: "To me is given authority in heaven and on earth, and lo, I am with you always, to the end of the world."

1: It is **not** true that we have to wait for those who are specially gifted, who are the prophets of the church, before we can do anything;

2: This **is** true: "I will pour out my spirit on all people, and your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your young people shall see visions, and your old folk shall dream dreams."

1: It is **not** true that our dreams of liberation of humankind, our dreams of justice, of human dignity, of peace, are not meant for this earth and its history;

2: This **is** true: "The hour comes, and it is now, that true worshippers shall worship God in spirit and in truth."

Amen