



SERMONS THAT WORK

Christmas 2

Love Defeats Evil

[RCL]: Jeremiah 31:7-14; Psalm 84 or 84:1-8; Ephesians 1:3-6,15-19a; Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23 or Luke 2:41-52 or Matthew 2:1-12

On this Second Sunday after Christmas, Matthew recounts the narrow escape of the Holy Family when King Herod ordered the execution of all the babies in and around Bethlehem, two years old and younger. Joseph is warned in a dream. He flees into Egypt with Mary and the infant Jesus. In Bethlehem, there is lamentation going up that would echo to the pyramids. An unknown number of innocent children are killed. Only one is known to get away.

If the king's plan had worked, the joy of Christmas would have been snuffed out even as the light of Christ was coming into the world. And yet, while Herod could and did exercise his own will, he could not thwart the ultimate will of God.

This matters so much, as what happened in Bethlehem was not an isolated incident. Herod's slaughter of the babes of Bethlehem is part of a pattern that is all too familiar. Pharaoh worried that the Hebrew slaves were growing too numerous and so slaughtered innocent babies. Only the infant Moses escaped that time by way of a floating basket that carried him into Pharaoh's own household.

And through history, we have seen the ongoing pattern in which tyrants can kill who they will. In recent memory, we have Stalin's wholesale execution of opponents in the Soviet Union, Pol Pot in Cambodia, and so on down to the genocide in Rwanda in the 1990s. In South Sudan, the government is once more recruiting child soldiers to fill out their army in a costly civil war. How do we make sense of a loving God looking over a world in which such senseless slaughter of the innocent is a repeating pattern?

In fleeing Bethlehem, Mary and Joseph and their infant son became refugees. Their flight from the power of a dictator has become all too familiar in all the killing fields of the world. Making sense out of Bethlehem means making sense out of the fallen world in which we live, which is vitally important.

God is omnipotent, which means all-powerful, but even having all power doesn't make two contradictory things happen at once. God cannot both give humans free will and take away that free will. If God prevented our choices that lead to pain and suffering in the world, then we would no longer be free.

The limits of what God cannot do are set not by logic or some arbitrary boundary; the limits of what God can and cannot do are set by love. Love is the founding principle of all that is. To say, “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son,” explains so much. It shows that first and foremost, God loves us unreservedly. Love demands freedom, requires it. True love can never be demanded or coerced. There is no other way. Force, demands, and oppression cannot create even the faintest spark of the fire of love.

Yes, one can coerce some sort of reaction. You can force someone to act out the semblance of the symptoms of love. But you cannot force love, as what is arrived at without free choice is not love. Love must be freely given and freely accepted in order to be love. For God to love us means that God must give us free will. There is no other way. And this is exactly what God did. God gave us a choice. And through our choices, we can get hurt and we can hurt – or even kill – others.

God has created a world in which love is possible and humans bend their wills to do some very ungodly acts. The result includes death at the hands of murderers or drunk drivers and so on. It also means that birth defects can occur from known causes like a mother taking drugs while pregnant, or causes less understood at the time, such as infants harmed by thalidomide.

A universe where real love is an option will always be a world in which pain and suffering are not only possible but likely. And yet, this world of choice founded on love is also what makes all the noble acts of self-sacrifice possible. This world is not only a world of pain and suffering, but also a world of generosity, kindness, and love.

God showed real love for creation, not by taking away the choice that made love possible. God showed love by becoming weak and vulnerable. God entered into the creation in the person of Jesus of Nazareth to gently weave back the tattered tapestry of our world with love. And through our free will, we can choose to respond to God’s love, committing to follow Jesus in answer to that love.

This week in our Gospel, we hear the painful truth that when Jesus was born, Herod struck out against innocent children in Bethlehem. And yet, we learn more about the Creator, as God’s plan cannot be thwarted. God loves us so much that he is willing to enter into the pain and suffering of this world to redeem it. Even as Herod could exercise his free will to do the unthinkable and end too many innocent lives to secure his power, Herod still did not have the power to stop God’s love and the plan of salvation for all. Yes, the world is fallen. Yes, those who wish to do evil have the free will to act on their wrong desires, but the free will of those who commit evil is powerless to stop the love of God. Evil exists for but a painful, tragic moment when compared to God’s eternal love.

What God did in Bethlehem during the tragedy of Herod’s slaughter of the innocents was to be present to those babes in life and then to be with them always in eternal life when they died. For the parents, God remained with them in the tragedy and stayed with them always, never departing from those in pain, even in the darkest tragedy. God does not abandon us to suffering but remains with us in the midst of our pain

and loss. Then, God works with all the terrible pain we humans cause, bringing good even out of unimaginable tragedy and loss.

The Bible does not hide the painful truth of the world as it is. Scripture does not try to pretend that all is well. Throughout the text, we see the painful truth of the world: that given the free choice to do good and to love others and act on that love, many will distort the image of God within them and do unspeakable things. Yet, God does not let this stand unchallenged. Herod could not put out the light of God's presence born in Bethlehem. Herod could not steal the gift of love which was Jesus.

In answer to the evil humans do, God offers love. Real, enduring, eternal love. Love that in time will break the power of evil and death. Yes, we see that an evil tyrant could use the gift of free will to do evil. But we also see that evil could not and did not win a victory in Bethlehem and it will never win an ultimate victory in all creation. The power of love can and does defeat evil. Love will win out in the end.

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