

When God Walks the Earth

Part 6 of Sermon Series:
A Geography of Salvation

a sermon based on
Isaiah 63:7-9 & Matthew 2:13-23

and delivered on
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at
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That (Matthew 2:16-18 – the slaughter of the innocents) is not my favorite passage of Scripture. It bugs me to read that passage just four days after Christmas when we are still filled with joy at the good news of the birth of Jesus. At the same time, we can't avoid it. It's there in the Bible. In Matthew's account of the Gospel, it's the last thing that we hear about Jesus until he is grown. We hear the announcement, the search of the magi, and this.

Some historians dismiss the story as legend or myth, because there aren't any accounts outside of the Bible. They acknowledge that Herod (This is Herod the Great – the first of the Herods.) was a pretty awful guy. It wouldn't have been outside his character. Then again, even Scripture doesn't claim this was a nation-wide slaughter, but limited to one small town and the surrounding area. At the time Jesus was born it the population was somewhere between 300 and 1,000 people.¹ Even with the larger estimate, the number of boys under two years old would have been what? Twenty? Thirty at most? That's still a tragedy – still heinous but not particularly newsworthy as it relates to Herod.

So why do we need to hear this story? It's not just so that a prophecy could be fulfilled. The angel told Joseph to flee to Egypt with Jesus because "Herod (was) about to search for (him), to destroy him." It's only later that we hear that Herod decided to do more. So again, why do we need to hear this story?

We need to hear it, because it tells us something about God's devotion to us. That might sound perplexing. Please, bear with me. It's easy to praise God for Jesus' birth outside of a capital city and into the humble surroundings of normal folks as a sign of his solidarity with all people. That's the story we get in Luke: the manger, the shepherds, the dedication at the temple. But what we forget is how very dangerous it was for God to dwell among us.

God's willingness to take that risk – God's willingness to trust Joseph and Mary – that allowed humanity to see, for the first time since the beginning when Adam and Eve hid from him in the garden, the glory of God full of grace and truth. (Jn 1:14b) As Isaiah said in that passage earlier, "It was no messenger or angel, but his presence that saved them." (Isa 63:9b)

That's what the powers of the world wanted and want us to ignore. The good news that God will put himself in midst of suffering for our sake brings hope to people when worldly powers say listen to me because only I can protect you from something worse. So the world rebels – not always as blatantly as Herod but it does.

We see it in how some people are favored over others. I read a story this week about a 78-year-old woman who didn't have much to celebrate at Christmas one year. Her husband had died earlier in the year. When he died, the small pension that had only barely provided for their needs was cut. Her bills had started to pile up and some were months overdue.

Rather than moving into nursing care (which isn't inexpensive), she insisted on staying in the small two bedroom house that had been home for her and her husband for almost sixty years. It wasn't much. It needed repairs but it was home.

So that first Christmas alone without her husband, she faced another challenge. She was cold. She lived in the mid-south where it doesn't get as cold as it does here, but where temperatures can some times drop into the low 30s or high 20s. The house didn't have a furnace. She and her husband had used space heaters fueled by natural gas. But this Christmas – this December – there wasn't any gas flowing through those lines. Remember, she was behind on her bills – and the city-owned utility – had shut off her gas in the middle of winter. She knew she was behind, (and remember this isn't a northern state like Illinois) but she didn't know they could shut off the gas in the middle of winter.

Yet that morning, she read in the paper that more than 100 gas customers were also months behind in their payments – some of them longer, many with a larger balance due than she – including some major companies and government offices. Their gas was still on.

¹ <https://www.redletterchristians.org/bethlehem-then-and-now/> (accessed 12/29/2019)

So she reached out to the newspaper to tell her story. “All I want is some heat,” she told the reporter. The next day, an article in the paper told her story and compared it with “important” customers who still received gas even though they were delinquent.

The day after that, there was a knock at her door. She went to the door wrapped in a shawl because the temperature was in the mid-30s. A man was standing there.

“Yes,” she said not knowing what to make of this visitor.

“I’m Todd Carter. I’m the mayor.”

Now she’s flustered. “My house is a mess and it’s cold in here. I didn’t want to be a troublemaker or to interrupt your busy schedule. I just wanted some heat.”

“Juanita,” (that was the woman’s name. “Juanita,” he said, “I came to apologize on behalf of the city... We’re going to see that you get (your gas) back today.”

“But you’re the mayor. You didn’t have to come. You could have sent someone.”

“I know, but I wanted to bring the good news myself.”²

I don’t know that Mayor Carter expected any danger in going to the home of an old woman, but he chose to go in person, because it was important.

God came in the person of Jesus Christ because you are that important to him. Here’s the thing he didn’t just come to us, he actually entrusted human beings with his life. He counted on Mary to say, “Yes.” He counted on Joseph to do the right thing by her, and he counted on Joseph to protect Jesus.

He counts on us, too. Our God is not some abstract philosophical concept. Our God is a living and personal deity invested each of us. We can find examples of that throughout the Bible leading up to Jesus, and we find it most fully in Jesus when he walked the earth with us. Jesus himself said,

“Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.” (Jn 14:12-17)

My source for this is almost twenty years old, but according to Bob Sjogren it wasn’t until about 1900 that committed Christian believers represented 2.5% of world population. In the next seventy years, that doubled to 5% even as the population grew. In just twenty-two years it doubled again so that by 1992 committed believers made up 10% of world population.³ The church continues to grow outside North America – particularly in the global south, while we’re facing decline. What happened?

In 1992 cell phones were a luxury. The internet was just for geeky scientists. People wrote letters and met face to face. Things that still happen in other parts of the world.

God continues to walk among us and with us through the Holy Spirit. The world may not know that because it doesn’t know him. That’s where we come in. I think it applies not just to evangelism but to health of our relationships with one another and the world.

² Merle G. Franke, *Lectionary Tales for the Pulpit: For Cycle A* (Lima, Ohio: CSS Pub. Co, 1995).

³ Robert Morgan, *Nelson’s Complete Book of Stories, Illustrations & Quotes* (Nashville: T. Nelson Publishers, 2000) 567.

Especially now when our “connections” with one another are so often distant – not even by letter or phone, but social media posts and texting, we forget the power of presence. There’s something to be said for hearing the tone in a voice and seeing the expression on a face and feeling the comfort of another person.

In *History of the Christian Church Volume 2*, Philip Schaff writes

“Christianity once established was its own best missionary. It grew naturally from within. It attracted people by its very presence. It was a light shining in darkness and illuminating the darkness. And while there were no professional missionaries devoting their whole life to this specific work, every congregation was a missionary society, and every Christian believer a missionary, inflamed by the love of Christ to convert his fellow man.”⁴

God invites us to walk the earth with him to meet people face to face. It’s good not only good for our souls but our mental well-being, and it really does make a difference. Maybe that can be a new year resolution – to be present. Present with the community of believers – but even when it’s not efficient to be present with family and friends or even customers so that the power of the Holy Spirit will shine through you. AMEN.

⁴ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church, Vol 2: Ante-Nicene Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1910) 20-21.