

The Rev. Mary Haggerty
St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church – Florissant, MO
2nd Sunday after Christmas Day, January 3, 2021
Jeremiah 31:7-14; Matthew 2: 13-15, 19-23

Last week, a friend of mine down in Sewanee sent a photo of one of the aisles at the local Piggly Wiggly. It was a picture of a display of “Be my Valentine” Little Debbie snack cakes. On December 24th. In the retail world Christmas is over before it has even begun! But in the church world we are knee deep into the season. We encounter some of the most dramatic of our family stories during these days following all the tinsel and holiday merriment. It’s in these days after we retell the story of the birth of Jesus that we have the time to ask ourselves what it all means. What difference does it make that this baby was born in the manger? What do we do now that the tree is taken down and the lights are unplugged?

If Christmas is going to mean more than one or two joyful days of traditions and good food and our favorite movies, we need today’s readings. We have celebrated the “holy infant so tender and mild” and “the little town of Bethlehem” where his parents at last found shelter. We have remembered the young couple who gave birth to their firstborn child and the angels who hovered over them proclaiming peace on earth and good will to all. We need these beautiful stories to ground us, and we need the reality of today’s reading to remind us that this baby who was born in a manger is Emmanuel, God-with-us. God-with-us on the lovely days of celebration and God-with-us on the days that bring fear and pain and heartache.

As we return to “normal” after Christmas, we return to a world where heartache abounds. Covid-19 is still with us. My own family has been deeply impacted by it as many of yours have. The disproportionate impact of the virus on racial minority groups has exposed systems that unconsciously pronounce some lives more valuable than others. Violence continues to plague

our streets. Too many of our brothers and sisters are hungry and cold. Those in power seem to idolize power rather than using it for the good of all. We need the hope of Christmas. But not a distant hope – ours is a hope that comes to us in the midst of the struggle.

Jesus was born into a world every bit as troubled as ours is today. Herod was a power-hungry ruler, so threatened by this newborn king that he initiated a reign of violence. Our reading this morning brackets the slaughter of the innocents, where we are told that Herod killed all male children two years and younger in and around Bethlehem. We read the verses before and the verses following this morning and we skip that gruesome story. But we get a sense of it in the divine voice that speaks to Joseph in a dream. He is warned to take his family and flee to Egypt to escape Herod's reign of terror. Our Holy Family was a refugee family. And then we learn that after Herod died Joseph was told they could return to the land of Israel. But in another dream, Joseph learns that Herod's son was still a threat, so he took his family to the region of Galilee.

God did not wait for the perfect time to come into this world. The God we meet in Jesus begins his life immersed in the tension and fear and the violence of our fallen world. God does not wait for the perfect time to enter our lives. God comes in the midst of the most difficult parts of our story to remind us that the world is not just fallen but it is also God's beloved creation. Emmanuel, God-with-us, comes to establish God's reign of peace and love and justice even in an unjust, unloving, violent world. We need the whole story – Jesus born an innocent sweet baby in a manger on a starry night full of hope and Jesus born into a world that resists his light. The people in darkness have seen a great light.

This is not a new story. We hear it in our reading from Jeremiah this morning. The book of Jeremiah is downright depressing. He writes about a world of trauma – the fall of Judah as a nation and a religious community, the destruction of Jerusalem, the forfeiture of land, death and

deportation of thousands. And right in the middle of that we have today's reading. Full of hope in God who will lead the weeping people by brooks of water in a straight path. God who will turn their mourning into joy, who will comfort them and give them gladness. God promises, in the midst of the suffering, that the people will be satisfied with God's bounty. God is with the people. Not only *with* them, but *for* them. God will pull them through and bring them out on the other side. The people in darkness have seen a great light.

It is a fragile balance – this holiness in the midst of all that resists it. But our Scriptures tell us again and again that the holiness is real, the light is breaking through, the darkness will not prevail. This is the hope we carry with us well after the eggnog is all gone, after the lights are unplugged, after the last gift is exchanged. This is the hope that Joseph carried deep within.

Because Joseph cut his teeth on stories of the God of Israel who wanted to be in covenant with the people, because he knew deep down that God is with the people and for the people, he paid attention to the divine voice that came to him in his dreams. He expected it. Do we expect God to be present right in the middle of it all? That is the promise of Christmas that we carry with us, after all.

Paying attention came with a price. Joseph had to take another path, he had to change his route. As we step back from the festivities and return to normal life, how might we need to alter our path that the light may be protected and that the powers and principalities of our day may not prevail against the innocent? How might we, like the Holy Family, be willing to take a different road, to leave the familiar, in order to allow Christmas to make a difference in us and in our homes and in our neighborhoods? As we make our New Years resolutions and stock up on our Valentine cakes may we follow Joseph's lead. May we pay attention to the Divine voice within

and all around us that calls us to say no to the forces of evil and to be bearers of the light of Christ to a hurting world.