Second Sunday of Christmas

Psalm 84 Matthew 2:1-12

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church January 3, 2021

When Matthew wrote Jesus' birth narrative for his Gospel, he was intending for the story to do to its **readers** the same thing the birth itself did to the **Wise Men** in Matthew's telling of the tale… that is to send them from the manger "on a different road," on a different trajectory for their lives, uprooted and upended as the Wise Men were by what they witnessed at the end of their long journey led by the light of the star…

The impact of that uprooting and upending beautifully imagined by T. S. Eliot in his poem "The Journey of the Magi," in which one of the Wise Men describes their harrowing journey, citing the lack of shelters, the hostile cities, the unfriendly towns, saying *"at the end we preferred to travel all night,/ sleeping in snatches,/ with the voices singing in our ears, saying/ that this was all folly."*

"All this was long ago, I remember" T.S. Eliot's Wise Man recounts in the last stanza of the poem…

And I would do it again," he says, *"but set down*

This set down

This: were we led all that way for

Birth or death? There was a Birth, certainly,

We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth

And death,

But had thought they were different; this Birth was

Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.

We returned to our places, these kingdoms,

But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,

With an alien people clutching their gods.

I should be glad of another death.

I will admit that T. S. Eliot's poetry is sometimes difficult to comprehend. But what is clear from his poem "The Journey of the Magi" is how "deadly" to the Wise Men's previous lives was their experience at the birth of Jesus… That birth leading to the death of their **ease** with their former lives and the "old dispensation"…the death of their **ease** with their old kingdoms and with the people of those kingdoms clutching "their gods"…

Raising the question for at least one of the Wise Men of whether they had been led all that way for birth or for death… or perhaps for both, as the birth of Jesus led to a kind of death for Wise Men **and** a birth into a whole new way of seeing things… a kind of "life-birthing-life-giving-death" for which the Wise Man in T.S. Eliot's poem deeply longed years later when he thought back to the journey the Magi had taken, saying he would be so glad, despite its misfortunes and folly, its birth and death, to undertake it once again…

It is just such a "life-birthing-life-giving death" Matthew intended for his early Christian community when he told the story of Jesus' birth in his Gospel… Although we, as readers two millenia later, do not much approach Matthew's birth narrative expecting to experience the story in such a way, so accustomed are we to having our Christmas "with sugar" (as one theologian has said) and "only for one day…"

But Matthew's telling of the story does not come with sugar, nor is its intended as a one- day story event, as it actually comes in five acts…

Beginning with the angel's visitation in Joseph's dream foretelling the birth of Jesus'…

And **ending** with a divine presence in another of Joseph's dreams telling him to return to Nazareth with Mary and Jesus after having fled with them to Egypt to escape the murderous rampage of Herod…

And **in the middle,** three acts detailing the Wise Men's final approach and experience at the manger, their arrival and departure overshadowed by Herod's fears over the news of this "infant king" and Herod's demands that the Wise Men report back to him with information about the baby's location so he might go also and "worship" him… a demand the Wise Men refused to obey in the end, choosing instead (after their experience in the presence of the Christ child) **to go home "by a different road"**… that decision leading Herod to order the slaughter of all the children in and around Bethlehem two years old and younger, since the one he wanted most to find could not be found…

All of which is to say that while the heart of Matthew's birth narrative invites its readers to see the beautiful image of the Wise Men kneeling before the Christ child under the light of the Christmas star, the acts on both sides of that star-lit scene posit the story of Jesus' birth in a world wrought with power-mongering, fear, terror, suffering and death…

And begging the question, “What is it that Matthew wanted his readers to see in his five-act birth narrative so that they too might leave the story ‘by a different road’…with a different trajectory for their lives, no longer at ease with the ‘old dispensation’?’ What was it Matthew wanted those in his community to see so that they, like the Wise Men, might experience a life-birthing-life-giving death when hearing the story of Jesus’ birth?

A question for which I find some helpful insights in a story I heard twenty years ago… A story told by a pastor about a girl named Laura who had been part of this pastor’s first congregation…

So it seems Laura had agreed to play the part of Mary in the Sunday School Christmas pageant one year, much to everyone’s surprise. She had always been a painfully shy girl, and was the last person anyone expected to volunteer to play the part. But she did, and learned her part very well.

Things for the pageant, just a week away, were coming together nicely, when Laura’s mother called the church to tell the pastor that Laura had decided she couldn’t play the part of Mary after all. The pastor said she’d come over to Laura’s house to talk with her, thinking all Laura needed was a confidence-building pep-talk.

But, as the pastor said as he told the story, when she went into Laura’s living room with words of praise for the fine job Laura was doing in preparation for the pageant, Laura stopped her and said, “Pastor, you don’t understand… I haven’t changed my mind about playing the part of Mary because I’m nervous. But I just read the account of Jesus’ birth from Matthew’s Gospel, and I discovered that all the babies in Bethlehem were killed by Herod and his soldiers. Only Jesus and his parents were spared…

“Pastor,” Laura continued, “I don’t want to be the only mother whose child is allowed to live through Herod’s killing of the children. I just can’t stand up in front of everyone holding Jesus and pretending to look happy when I know all of the other babies are going to die.”

The pastor said she was taken back. And after a moment of silence she said, “Laura, will you play the part of Mary if you can get up in front of the congregation before the pageant starts and tell them what you just told me?”

After some thought, Laura agreed to the pastor’s proposal. And that year, during the Christmas pageant, after Laura told the congregation of her hesitation to play the part of Mary, she found she couldn’t hold back tears as she held the baby Jesus. But neither could anyone else. And for the first time in many years of pageants, said the pastor, those in attendance knew something certain about the gift of the Christ child… *silence…*

What I want to say is that after I heard the pastor tell the story of Laura and her portrayal of the grieving Mother Mary, I knew I would go away from the Christmas story, for the very first time, by a different road than I had come… on a different trajectory from the one to which I had grown accustomed (the one with served with sugar, and only for a day), uprooted and upended as I was by Laura's witness to the deepest meaning of Jesus' birth…

Her willingness to so totally identify with the suffering of those families whose babies were slaughtered by Herod **bearing witness** to a love so deep and true and visceral and real it wouldn't even abide by the contours of the traditional story line, but broke into the narrative with which we have all grown accustomed and cried, "No! This horror will not go unnoticed… This terror and loss and grief and death will not go unnoticed… Because I will hold it, and I will name it, and I will accompany and suffer with the mothers and fathers whose babies were slaughtered, even as I hold the baby Jesus in my arms…"

What I want to say is that I think Matthew would have loved the way Laura told the story at the Christmas pageant that year because she bore witness to the very same thing to which Matthew bore witness in his telling of the story; **namely the astounding insight that with the birth of Jesus, Love's Divine presence refused to follow the contours of the old story lines, breaking into all the old narratives,** even the glorious and beautiful old narratives of the People of Israel that imagined the Divine Presence coming to redeem Eden and to restore Jerusalem in power and majesty and triumphant glory… Even the well-known old cultural narratives that have always insisted that "might makes right" and "the ends justify the means" and "God helps those who help themselves"….

Matthew saying instead, "Look here… Look at this baby born to two "nobody parents" in a two-bit town far from the halls of power in an empire run by guys so fearful of losing power they will do anything to keep it… Look here, and you will see the presence of a God who knows that the most powerful force in all of creation is the power of suffering, accompanying love… **A love that dares be born in the midst of a world bent on maintaining the structures and the systems of the old dispensations no matter the carnage required to do so… A love that says in the midst of such carnage, "I am Emmanuel God with you through it all… Look here… Take heart. Be not afraid. Because once this love has been born into the world no principality or power or Herod or Caesar can keep it from being born, from rising in the midst of any carnage or any terror again and again and again…**

Ask the Wise Men and they will tell you it is so. Ask the congregation that heard the testimony of a young girl named Laura at the Christmas pageant one year and they will tell you it is so. Ask the poor mother who was caught shoplifting food items in a major American city just before Christmas of this year so her children could eat, and who was overcome with gratitude when the policeman called to arrest her bought her a $250.00 gift card for a local grocery store instead… Ask her, and she will tell you it is so…

They will all tell you the very thing Matthew was hoping his early Christian community would see and hear and know in his story of Jesus' birth, even as the Herods and the Caesars of the late first century came up with their own ways of slaughtering the innocents and terrorizing the populace…

They will tell you about a love that once you have seen it with your own eyes, or heard its movement in your midst, will always send you home by a different road… will always make you less at ease with the old kingdoms, the old dispensations, the old narratives… will always invite you into a life-birthing-life-giving kind of death that provides a new trajectory for your life, lit by the light of a star we know to be the light of love, the light of Christ…

This is what Matthew hoped his readers would come to see and to know in his telling of the birth of Jesus… It was a story intended to give hope in the midst of a great darkness… a story we too are invited to hold onto in the darkness of our own time…

A story that reminds us that despite our fervent hopes that 2021 will be a better year than 2020 in a thousand different ways, our deepest and truest hope rests not on the success of the vaccine to eradicate the Coronavirus… or the effectiveness of our political leaders to address our national crises… or the resolve of global entities to work for health and wholeness for all of creation…

(Not that these issues are unimportant. Not that we shouldn't work with passion and purpose on behalf of any and all efforts that serve the common good)…

But our hope… our ultimate hope rests not on the success of any of these efforts… But on a story of a God whose promise is God's presence in the absence of all success, in the absence of all hope… in the absence of all light… the presence of the one who is Emmanuel God with us through it all, inviting us in this season of Christmas to see love's incarnate promise born into the most unlikely and deadly and desolate of places, even our own lives…

And in the knowledge of so scandalous and ridiculous and beautiful a thing, invites us to leave the manger and the Holy Family by a different road. Along with the Wise Men and Laura and all the others who bear witness in a thousand thousand ways to what they have seen…

May it be so dear friends, in the name of Jesus, who even now is waiting to be born again and again in the very craziest of second comings…