

From Bethlehem to Bedlam

Matthew 2:13-23

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Philadelphia Presbyterian Church

January 2, 2011

In the early part of the 1400's in England a hospital opened in London that was given the name Bethlehem Hospital. That hospital became what was called in times past a lunatic asylum. Over the years the name Bethlehem was shortened and slurred to Bedlam, and that where our word "bedlam" comes from—a word for all kinds of lunacy, wild uproar and confusion. From Bethlehem to Bedlam.

Actually that's the way the Bible story goes. One minute the Wise Men are bowing before the Christ child with their gifts; the next minute Joseph and Mary are packing up to flee to Egypt to escape cruel King Herod. One day the shepherds drop their shepherding to go kneel before the King of kings; the next day they are back hurling rocks at the wild animals that would kill the sheep. One day the cattle are lowing; the next it's back to mooing and getting fattened for the slaughter. One day we hear the angels' song telling us that we have nothing to fear; the next it's back to dealing with real human fears and anxieties. From Bethlehem to Bedlam.

And it seems that Bedlam comes closer to describing life in our world than does Bethlehem.

In these days that follow Christmas, there are two other dates that are recognized on the church calendar. The church calendar recognizes December 26, the day after Christmas, as St. Stephen's Day.

The story of Stephen is told in Acts 6 & 7. Stephen was one of the first seven deacons who took care of the poor; Stephen performed many great wonders and miracles among the people. But the things that Stephen was doing also drew the attention of the authorities, and they didn't like what they saw. Stephen was arrested and brought to trial. In his testimony before the Council Stephen recited the mighty acts of God, but he also noted how the people had failed to follow God. And the Bible says, "As the members of the Council listened to Stephen, they became furious and ground their teeth at him in anger. With a loud cry the Council members covered their ears with their hands. Then they all rushed at him at once, threw him out of the city and killed him" (Acts 7:54).

Isn't it ironic that the day after we celebrate Christ's birth, we remember Stephen, the first Christian martyr, the first person who gave his life bearing witness to the one whose birth we just celebrated the day before.

Another date on the church calendar that comes in these days following Christmas is known as "Holy Innocents"—it's December 28—a day to remember the innocent children who were massacred by King Herod in his attempt to do away with Jesus.

We are hardly finished unwrapping our gifts when we are shocked back into the real world where there is pain and suffering.

Christmas Day gives us a respite from the problems and hurts of the world, but only a brief respite. The unemployed wake up the next morning and still have no place to go to work. Those who are sick may have been able to forget their aches and pains for a day, but now it's back to concern about health, life and death. For a day we have been able to sing about the Prince of Peace; but now it's back to trying to forge some kind of peace in

Afghanistan and Iraq and the Middle East and in our troubled lives. Over and over again during this season people say, “Why can’t we just keep this spirit all year round?” We love the joy and beauty that fills this time of year and wish there were some way to keep it all the year through. But unfortunately it always seems to fade away.

That is what is happening in the scripture that I read earlier. We are shocked back to reality when we read of Herod’s violent anger and the slaughter of the innocent children. What Matthew gives us in the second chapter of his gospel is the two responses to Jesus that will continue all his life long and even beyond. The first reaction is the gentle, humble acceptance of him by the wise men. The second response is the violent, hostile reaction by Herod.

Let’s look a little closer at the scripture. There are three scenes here. In the first scene the angel who comes to Joseph warning him of Herod’s anger. The holy family, under cover of night, flees to Egypt, and Matthew says that it was to fulfill the words of the prophet.

Next scene. The camera focuses on Herod, who in a classic case of overkill, decides to massacre every child under the age of two—just to make sure that his target wouldn’t be missed. And again Matthew says, “In this way what the prophet said came true.”

And in the last scene there are Mary and Joseph and the baby on their return trip settling in Galilee. And here too Matthew says it was to fulfill what the prophet said.

I think that this passage has a couple of important things to say about the Bedlam that is a part of this world. It speaks to the suffering that is an inevitable part of life. In this passage as in so many passages throughout the Gospel accounts of the life of Jesus, we are struck with the great suffering he and those he met endured. One of the beatitudes reads, “Happy are you when people insult you and persecute you and tell all kinds of evil lies against you because you are my followers. Be happy and glad, for a great reward is kept for you in heaven” (Matthew 5:11).

Suffering, persecution. Is that the way it’s always going to be for followers of Jesus? Is Bedlam so much the rule that followers of the child of Bethlehem will always encounter rejection? If it is going to be that way, then why would anyone follow Jesus? Why was Stephen willing to go to those lengths to testify to his faith? Why? Because Stephen had found something in Jesus Christ that was far greater than the pains and suffering of this world. He had found a security in Jesus that was stronger than anything the Council could do to him. Stephen had found what the apostle Paul later discovered when he said, “I consider that what we suffer at this present time cannot be compared at all with the glory that is going to be revealed to us” (Romans 8:18). The light that Christ brings into our lives allows us to see through even the deepest darkness. The peace he brings gives us strength to endure even the greatest madness and evil and bedlam of this world.

But there is more here in this passage. Three times Matthew says that these things happened in order to fulfill what had been said by the prophets. He says this in order for us to see that there is something bigger than the daily events we experience. He is pointing us to the sovereignty of God whose will and purpose for God’s people shall be fulfilled. He is saying that greater than the machinations of human beings is the power of God to accomplish God’s plan. The message here is that God is in control.

In Romans Paul says, “In all things God works for good.” In ALL things. God is in control and God is working out God’s good purpose for us.

Occasionally you will hear some well-meaning person who is trying to comfort someone who is going through a crisis of life or some painful experience say, "It's the will of God." I understand what the speaker is trying to do, but I also know that those words almost never provide the comfort that the speaker intends. It is little comfort to someone whose child is suffering to hear that it is God's will. I daresay that the mothers of those children King Herod killed were not comforted by people who told them that it was God's will.

And yet, I do believe that God has not resigned from the world, and that God does have a plan and is working toward the fulfillment of that plan, and that in all things God works for good. If God is not able to work through the tragic events of life, then they are even more tragic and meaningless.

Bigger than our hurts, deep and painful though they may be, is our God. The secret to the mystery of life is that life is not in our hands, but in God's.

The joy of Christmas is a glimpse of the truth that the chaos and confusion and evil and bedlam in which we live do not have the last word. The story does not end in Bedlam. In our darkness there shines a light. In our pains and sufferings there remains a hope. In our sin there is a savior who brings forgiveness. God's final word is not Bedlam, but Bethlehem. God is with us. †

[The title of this sermon and some of the ideas here were taken from a sermon by Edmund Steimle in his collection of sermons *From Death to Birth*, p. 115-121.]