

Year A First Sunday after Christmas Let It Be So

Now this short little episode in Jesus' life could have been called his downward spiral into oblivion. People back then would know what I was talking about. Jesus, the great Messiah, born in the City of David – David, who was the greatest king of all Israel and Judea...Jesus, the baby bowed to by foreign kings, given lavish, expensive gifts...Jesus, the one meant to rule the world was suddenly fleeing for his life into Egypt where his people were once held through oppression. And it gets worse. When it was safe for him to head back into the land of his birth, he should have gone to Jerusalem – that's where all of the kings ruled – but, no, this king ended up in Galilee. Yeesh. Galilee was commonly known as "Galilee of the Gentiles" (Matt. 4:15). It was once a part of the northern kingdom of Israel but the land had never really been recovered since its fall to the Assyrians, and it was now widely populated with "foreigners." The Jews in Judea considered Galilean Jews to be barely better than Samaritans. A Messiah coming from Galilee wouldn't get much respect and Nazareth was even worse. This little agricultural village, with a population of about 500, was so insignificant that, at one time, some historians and archaeologists denied that such a place had ever existed. The well-known question by Nathanael in John's Gospel: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" was likely a popular saying at that time. And this is where the Messiah ended up?

Why on earth would the Messiah of the world, born to be great, worshipped by kings, end up in the little backwater town of Nazareth? It certainly tells us something important about our God, doesn't it? And it also helps us come to grips with the troubling – let's just skip over and not dwell on it – part of the story...You

know, the part where Herod murders all the little babies in Bethlehem. So, what does Jesus' downward spiral into oblivion tell us about God and how does it help us deal with this God allowing the murder of those babies?

As the Messiah by-passes the grandeur of a royal palace in Jerusalem and settles into the small village of Nazareth, we learn that our God operates vastly differently from the powerful humans we know. The almighty, all-powerful creator of all things decides to dwell among us as, of all things, a vulnerable little baby, a baby completely dependent on others for his survival. Powerful humans never would have thought of this. They would think it's ridiculous – putting yourself in a position of weakness. No way. And what's worse, this little baby – God in the flesh – wasn't even born into money. He had next to nothing. Where's the power of God in that? God came to us as a vulnerable child to show us that our idea of power is corrupt and ineffective – absolutely useless in transforming the world into heaven on earth. Why? Well, have you ever stopped to realize that we call human power "success"? Success. Because as a human, you are powerful if you have lots of money. You're powerful if you have lots of possessions and, of course, that gives you status. And, if you want more power, you need to acquire more money and possessions which bumps up your status. Human power can never and will never lead us into true peace and joy. We all know this. We quite happily rhyme off popular truisms to prove we know this: "Money doesn't buy happiness," we say. "Money is the root of all evil," we say. And God does a face palm and says, "Well, why don't you live like you believe those things?"

God came among us in the flesh to show us that his power is the only type of power that can save us – God showed us the power of abundant generosity, the

power of radical inclusion, the power of compassion and forgiveness. In a nutshell, he showed us how to love – how to love God and love each other – the two great commandments – because that is only way to reveal the fulness of God’s kingdom on earth as in heaven, the only way to true peace and joy.

Jesus lived among us to show *us* how to live – how to live the ways of God’s kingdom in order to work with him to bring the fulness of God’s kingdom. But we must always keep in our conscious awareness the fact that this life in God’s kingdom is our *choice*. We *choose* whether or not we live according to God’s ways. That brings me to that troubling question of the murder of the babies in Bethlehem.

I hear people ask such things as “If there is a God – and this God is good, why does he let bad things happen?” What do you say to people who ask that? It’s a bit of a long answer but you start with “free will”. Humans have free will. We make choices all day every day. Why would God give us the freedom to choose when he knows we are going to make a lot of wrong choices, a lot of bad choices, perhaps even some evil choices? Why? Well, we already know that only love can transform us and the world into heaven on earth – love of God and love of others and the planet. We also know that love cannot be forced. Love is chosen or it is *not* love. Sure, God could swoop in and say the word and create a paradise but how long would that last? There is a commandment against lying but I bet every single one of us has told a lie. Does the law against murder eliminate the desire to kill? Does the law against stealing erase the desire or need to have something you can’t or won’t pay for? No. Hearts and minds must be changed and that’s what we see as God’s plan all through scripture. I will write my law on their hearts, he tells us, so

that no one needs to be taught about God they will simply know God. The plan is to transform us into a people who know and love God and who, therefore, love the rest of God's creatures and God's world. Worshipping together is one way that God works to accomplish this. Being the church together is our training ground.

But people love power and many people who have a lot of power do horrible things to keep their power and to gain more power. This is what we see in Herod today. He knew that Jesus was a threat to his power and, when his direct approach to killing him was thwarted by an angel who warned the wise men, Herod decided to cover his bases by ordering the killing of all the children of a certain age. This isn't new. The Pharaoh of Egypt saw the Hebrew people growing more numerous and, in fear of losing his control of his country, he ordered the murder of all the newborn Hebrew boys. Jesus spoke out against human power like this – the power that corrupts and oppresses and creates inequality, crime, hunger, homelessness, the stripping of our planet's resources, and so on, and so on...Jesus spoke against this. He taught the people a way of life that was contrary to this power system. The people loved him and his ways leading to equality and inclusion of all. The people in power did not. Jesus was a threat to their power – attracting the multitudes, crying for reform. They needed to get rid of him and they did. They murdered him. Just like Herod had murdered the babies in Bethlehem, our God who allows us free choice was murdered by those not choosing his ways.

God's way – the only way that will truly transform us and the world – is a slow and painful process of love. It is a process that doesn't always seem to be working. It is a process that gets a lot of push back from the people with power. We have been

called and we have chosen to be a part of that process even though we're not perfect and we mess up sometimes. We all signed on for this painstaking process when we were baptized. We promised to follow God and God's ways, to transform ourselves and the world through the power of God's love. As we choose God's ways more and more often and encourage others to do the same, we can help the world move away from choosing the type of power that needs to hurt others, kill babies, wage wars, oppress others in order to be powerful...

This process may be slow but it is working. The fulness of God's kingdom is being revealed throughout the world and we are a part of that. Matthew constantly mentions throughout his Gospel that Jesus is fulfilling much earlier scripture in order to drive home the reality that God's plan is unfolding, we are being drawn toward the fulness of God's kingdom on earth as in heaven. Through the prophet Isaiah we hear beautiful, wonderful words of reassurance: "Surely they are my people," God says... and he became their savior in all their distress. It was no messenger or angel but his presence that saved them; in his love and pity it was he who redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old" (Is.63:8-9). In all your distress, God lifts you up and carries you. He dwelled *with* us and now he dwells *within* us so that we can help him carry the world. In all the distress, let it be so.