

Out of Egypt

Matthew 2:13-15

December 26, 2010

Oh God, help me. I see her as mine only, and I'm not what she thinks, I'm not strong, only you know what a weakling you made me, envious of men and frightened of women and not good, only you know how evil, and even the love she counts on is more of my self than of her. God, help me to be what she thinks I am.

Who said that? Joseph did! Or, at least, Joseph as William Gibson imagined him. This is what Joseph prays in the play, "Butterfingers Angel," written by William Gibson and performed in our church sanctuary three weeks ago under Greg Holt's direction.

This is what Mary prays ...

Oh God, let him be healthy and happy, I don't care if he's all that special or even a girl, just let me deserve this baby! ... Did I say that?

This is Joseph and Mary as William Gibson imagines them: unsure of themselves, full of longing and of doubt, needy, needy of love, but afraid of love too, wanting to do the right thing, or at least wanting to want to do the right thing, but unsure of themselves, still stumbling and imperfect in their attempts to do the right thing, still hesitant and imperfect in their attempts to show love.

In other words, like you and me! That's what I liked so much about this play: Mary and Joseph are like us! Is this what they were really like? Who knows? The Bible gives us little insight into their personal lives, because it's not their story. But they had to be like us! In some way, they had to be like us.

Christmas stories that portray Mary and Joseph as larger than life, as solemn and decisive and saintly, really do us a disservice, because then they are larger than life, because then the blessings that came to them could never come to us, and the parts they played in the unfolding of the drama of salvation could never be played by the likes of us.

The Joseph and Mary of "Butterfingers Angel" are not the real Joseph and Mary, but they are real. And in that respect this is a faithful retelling of the story, because Joseph and Mary were real. In the face of what they could not fully understand, in the face of an uncertain and unpredictable future, in the face of their own weaknesses and doubts and human frailty, they said "Yes" to God, and so provided to place for Jesus. They provided a place for Jesus to be among us.

And that's what we do too! We provide a place for Jesus to be among us! If we will, we provide a place for Jesus to be among us, in the midst of our bumbling and stumbling and halting and imperfect and utterly beautiful humanity!

There was another element in "Butterfingers Angel," rather unusual for Christmas plays, that I found both disturbing and powerfully compelling ... evil. Evil, in and around and about, taking many different forms, looking out from many different faces, not coming and going, but staying, always there, always with a stake in the events that unfold. How many times have you seen a Herod figure in a nativity scene? But Herod was there!

When we tell the story, we focus on singing angels and happy shepherds and adoring wise men. We often fail to remember, however, that Luke tells about shepherds because they were poor, and that Matthew tells about sages from the east because they were from the east -- foreigners, Gentiles, outsiders. The Bible purposely tells the story in a way that reminds us that Jesus comes for the sake of the poor and for the sake of the stranger.

And angels? What are we to make of angels? Not too much. Not too much. Angels are simply messengers, a vehicle for the expression of God's message to us.

But evil is there, too. Evil is there in the story, from the beginning. From the beginning there was resistance to Jesus' purpose. From the beginning there was opposition to the good news he came to bring. From the beginning there was a determination to sabotage everything he came to accomplish.

And that opposition is mysterious, amorphous, pervasive, hard to pin down. Paul wrote:

We are not fighting against human beings but against the wicked spiritual forces in the heavenly world, the rulers, authorities, and cosmic powers of this dark age ...

Herod was a ruler. Herod had power. But Herod was simply a pawn, both villain and victim, pushed and pulled and used by powers far beyond his own. I'm not talking, and the Bible is not talking, about demons, or about Satan. We're talking about the powerful forces that engulf us and infiltrate our hearts and minds and impel our actions, powerful forces that enslave us and bring us to grief along with those around us, forces like greed and envy and pride, forces like lust and anger and apathy. In other words, sin.

Sin has a hold on us, and sin saw Jesus as a threat from the beginning, and sin did its best to get him out of the way. Fear and pride in Herod, jealousy and coldness of heart among the Jewish religious authorities, cruelty and disdain among the Roman civil authorities -- sin hounded Jesus all his life, and finally, finally, had its way with him! Sin succeeded in getting Jesus out of the way. Didn't it?

It is good to remember Herod when we tell the story of Jesus' birth. Otherwise we might be tempted to think of Jesus' birth and Jesus' life as a beautiful and wonderful gesture from God that somehow went wrong, that somehow didn't work out the way God intended. But, from the beginning, Jesus came to stare down and stand up to the cosmic powers of this dark age, to challenge the forces that hold all of us in their tight grasp. From the beginning, Jesus came to set us free!

From the beginning, Jesus' story is a salvation story. His very name, Jesus, means "the Lord saves." We need him, because we need to be saved. We are enslaved. We are in chains. We are lost. We are lost in the darkness of our own aimlessness and sin.

At the end of the play, Herod and his soldiers comb the streets and houses of Bethlehem, searching out all the young boys to put them to death. Joseph and Mary take the newborn child and they flee. As the scripture says, they ran away from Bethlehem to save the life of the child.

And where did they go? They went to Egypt. Why to Egypt? It was out of the way, far enough away, a place of refuge. But Matthew sees another reason, too:

This was done to make come true what the Lord had said through the prophet, "I called my Son out of Egypt ..."

Where did Jesus come from? He came from Bethlehem, the birthplace of King David. He came from Nazareth, that rural backwater, that town from which nobody expected anything good to come. And he came from Egypt.

He came out of Egypt! He came out of Egypt, just as the prophet, Hosea, had said, "I called my Son out of Egypt." Now Hosea was talking about the exodus of the Hebrew people under Moses' leadership, and Matthew knows Hosea was talking about the exodus of the Hebrew people under Moses' leadership, but Matthew wants us to know that Jesus came out of Egypt, too, because Matthew wants us to know that this a new exodus! This is a new act of deliverance!

Just as God heard the cries of his people and brought them out of Egypt and set them free from their cruel oppressors and made them his own, in the same way, God is bringing his people out of Egypt again, bringing them out of slavery, setting them free from the forces that enslave them, and making them his own. And God is doing it in Jesus. Just as Israel was brought out of Egypt to be a people of God, so Jesus is brought out of Egypt now to make a new people of God, to make a new people for God in union with himself.

So this is the meaning of Christmas for us -- providing a place for Jesus to come, providing a space for Jesus to be, in the midst of our humanness, in the midst of our uncertainty and our frailty, in the midst of our brokenness, to heal us, to fight for us, to break the hold of sin upon us, to make us new, to make of us a new people of God, to bring God delight, and to make our joy complete.

Glory to God in the highest heaven and glory to the newborn king!

The light shines in the darkness! Jesus Christ is among us! Pass it on!