



It's a new year and yet, to me, it already feels old. A new Christ child and yet between the wonderful readings of "to you a son is born" and "Alleluia" on Christmas Eve and today we have the Feast of the Holy Innocents on December 28th. The day when we remember the male children less than 2 years old slaughtered by Herod because Herod was afraid of baby Jesus and what that baby born in a manger might mean to Herod's power. We also have the remembrance on December 26th of Stephen, the first martyr – stoned to death for proclaiming Christ as Messiah. For a more pleasant remembrance, the celebration of the Holy Name on January 1st marks the day within the Jewish tradition that Jesus would have been circumcised and officially given his name. And tomorrow, January 6th is The Epiphany- the day we end the Christmas season by celebrating the arrival of the Magi, colloquially the three kings. The day that Jesus, a Jewish baby, is revealed to the entire world as God incarnate. God with us in flesh and blood. God with us in human form.

In considering which of the three Gospel readings for today to select for this morning, I was struck by the amount of anxiety in each of them. Perhaps more in the two passages from Matthew than in the one from Luke, although the text of Luke tells us that Mary said: "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety."

Life then and now is not always stable and calm. It is not always predictable but can be unsettling when you go to sleep with one view of the world and wake up to find things have changed pretty dramatically while you were asleep. Lately in talking with friends I sense a rising level of anxiety and concern with the instability in our world – internationally, nationally and locally. That bone-deep concern that what I've known and counted on may not continue and I don't know what the future holds. What do we hold onto and how do we learn new coping skills and resilience?

Paul, writing to the Ephesians offers us this comfort and advice:

... I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. ¹⁷ I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, ¹⁸ so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, ¹⁹ and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.

We pray. We look to God for a spirit of wisdom and for revelation. We learn the hope to which God has called us as Christians. We give thanks for our community of faith to support us in our trials, our disappointments and yes, in our celebrations. We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses who support us no matter the challenges we face.

We live in a time where being resilient is ever more important if we are to continue to be able to live a life that glorifies God. Research has shown that resilience is critical if we are going to continue to be able to function in a world that is less and less stable. Resilience is the ability to adapt well to adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or stress

(<https://www.skillsyouneed.com/ps/resilience.html> 1/3/20). Some call resilience the “rubber ball” factor.

Reading between the lines, it sounds like the Magi themselves may have had some anxiety and needed resilience. They followed protocol when they checked in with Herod, the ruler of the country where they believed the Messiah was born but then they were warned not to follow Herod’s instruction to return and tell Herod where Jesus could be found. They left for their own country by another road.

They listened to the warning given to them in a dream and took steps to avoid having to cross Herod, perhaps even at the threat of their own lives. Imagine if they had returned to Herod and disclosed where Jesus was- would Herod have let them live to tell others about what they had seen and the gifts they had left? Would Herod have let them live if they refused to tell Herod what they had seen and done? Was the new route home more dangerous, longer? Was another road known to them or unknown? Today, we can be glad that they did find Jesus and that they did go home by another road. That decision, perhaps at some cost to them, led to Jesus growing up and being known to us as Christ, the Savior, the Messiah.

Bishop-elect Frank Logue writes this¹:

If [Herod’s] plan had worked, the joy of Christmas would have been snuffed out even as the light of Christ was coming into the world. And yet, while Herod could and did exercise his own will, he could not thwart the ultimate will of God.

This matters so much, as what happened in Bethlehem was not an isolated incident. Herod’s slaughter of the babes of Bethlehem is part of a pattern that is all too familiar. Pharaoh worried that the Hebrew slaves were growing too numerous and so slaughtered innocent babies. Only the infant Moses escaped that time by way of a floating basket that carried him into Pharaoh’s own household.

And through history, we have seen the ongoing pattern in which tyrants can kill who they will. In recent memory, we have Stalin’s wholesale execution of opponents in the Soviet Union, Pol Pot in Cambodia, and so on down to the genocide in Rwanda in the 1990s.

...How do we make sense of a loving God looking over a world in which such senseless slaughter of the innocent is a repeating pattern? ...

Making sense out of Bethlehem means making sense out of the fallen world in which we live, which is vitally important.

¹ https://episcopalchurch.org/library/sermon/love-defeats-evil-christmas-2-january-5-2020?utm_source=STW+English&utm_campaign=9b8f521322-

EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2019_12_30_03_43&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_06dc88fe08-9b8f521322-136036241 (1/3/20)

God is omnipotent, which means all-powerful, but even having all power doesn't make two contradictory things happen at once. God cannot both give humans free will and take away that free will. If God prevented our choices that lead to pain and suffering in the world, then we would no longer be free.

The limits of what God cannot do are set not by logic or some arbitrary boundary; the limits of what God can and cannot do are set by love. Love is the founding principle of all that is. To say, "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son," explains so much. It shows that first and foremost, God loves us unreservedly. Love demands freedom, requires it. True love can never be demanded or coerced. There is no other way. Force, demands, and oppression cannot create even the faintest spark of the fire of love. Yes, one can coerce some sort of reaction. You can force someone to act out the semblance of the symptoms of love. But you cannot force love, as what is arrived at without free choice is not love. Love must be freely given and freely accepted in order to be love. For God to love us means that God must give us free will. There is no other way. And this is exactly what God did. God gave us a choice. And through our choices, we can get hurt and we can hurt – or even kill – others.

God has created a world in which love is possible and humans bend their wills to do some very ungodly acts. The result includes death at the hands of murderers or drunk drivers and so on. ... A universe where real love is an option will always be a world in which pain and suffering are not only possible but likely. And yet, this world of choice founded on love is also what makes all the noble acts of self-sacrifice possible. This world is not only a world of pain and suffering, but also a world of generosity, kindness, and love.

God showed real love for creation, not by taking away the choice that made love possible. God showed love by becoming weak and vulnerable. God entered into the creation in the person of Jesus of Nazareth to gently weave back the tattered tapestry of our world with love. And through our free will, we can choose to respond to God's love, committing to follow Jesus in answer to that love.

It can be hard to love, especially when you're fearful or anxious. So while I remember that God calls us to love one another, I also find comfort in the Gospel of John, chapter 1, verses 1-5:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴ in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it. On days when resilience is hard, remember that Jesus is the light of the world. And the darkness did not overcome it. We too are called to be a light to the world. And the darkness will not overcome our light if we remain faithful to the one who gave us life and light, God the creator. God the redeemer. God the sustainer. **Amen.**