FROM BETHLEHEM TO BEDLAM

by

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Epiphany Sunday

8:30, 9:45, and 11:05 a.m.
Texts: Isaiah 60:1-6 • Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14 • Ephesians 3:1-12 • Matthew 2:1-12

Isaiah 43:1-7

But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you. Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life. Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; I will say to the north, “Give them up,” and to the south, “Do not withhold; bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth—everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.”

Psalm 72: 1-7, 10-14

Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to a king’s son. May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice. May the mountains yield prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness.

May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor. May he live while the sun endures, and as long as the moon, throughout all generations. May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass, like showers that water the earth. In his days may righteousness flourish and peace abound, until the moon is no more.
May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles render him tribute, may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts.

May all kings fall down before him, all nations give him service.

For he delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper.

He has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy.

From oppression and violence he redeems their life; and precious is their blood in his sight.

Ephesians 3:1-12

This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles— for surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given me for you, and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given me by the working of his power. Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him.
Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.”

When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.

They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.’”

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.”

When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.

On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.
Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house
not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse.
The stockings were hung by the chimney with care,
in hopes that St. Nicholas soon would be there.

The children were nestled all snug in their beds,
while visions of sugar plums danced in their heads.
And Mama in her 'kerchief, and I in my cap,
had just settled our brains for a long winter’s nap.

When out on the roof there arose such a clatter,
I sprang from my bed to see what was the matter....

No telling how many times in 2015 we sprang from our beds, metaphorically
or literally, awakened by the clatter of violence, angry rhetoric, disappointing, or
just downright bad and heartbreaking news. This was true globally, nationally, or
personally. Conflict, at times, seems all around us and within as well if the truth be
told. And, we ought to speak the truth in a place like this.

The Christmas stories are just like our lives — full of conflict. This homily is
about facing up to the reality of the conflict, or darkness, that exists both within us
and in our world and to suggest some ways for us to live in the light that the birth
of Jesus brings into our world and into our lives, about how we can live in that light
and be empowered to live as enlightened beings in a dark world.

That’s the hope. Okay?

Let’s start here: In 15th century in England, there was a religious order called
The Star of Bethlehem. In their effort to fulfill their mission, they started to take in
and care for a neglected part of the population — and one that is still neglected —
the insane. As they continued to take care of such people, they became a hospital.
The hospital was called The Hospital of St. Mary of Bethlehem.
You can imagine, before the use of drugs and contemporary insights into the treatment of the mentally disturbed, what that hospital must have looked and sounded like inside. It was the first lunatic asylum.

Over the years the name of the hospital began to be shortened and slurred. “The Hospital of St. Mary of Bethlehem” became “Mary of Bethlehem,” which became “Bethlehem,” which became “Bethlem,” which became “bedlam.” And because it was the kind of hospital it was with the activities that went on there, the word “bedlam” became the word for confusion, noise, and wild uproar.

From Bethlehem to Bedlam.

Isn’t that a parable of the experience of our lives? Certainly it is of Christmas. For weeks now, all roads have led metaphorically to Bethlehem. All has been joyful anticipation and hope. Mysterious angels announced miraculous births to Elizabeth, the old woman, and to Mary, scarcely more than a child. Mary and Joseph, according to one version of the story, make their uncomfortable pilgrimage to the dark security of a stable in Bethlehem. A mysterious star leads some more-than-worldly wise men to the place. And on the hills outside, the whole sky breaks open at the sound of an angelic chorus.

Bethlehem — the focus of the hopes and fears of all the years — all the years back, back, back to the time when a promise was made to Abraham and he started out on a journey to some sort of promised land. Bethlehem, the end of the road for everybody.

Christmas comes. We cannot hold on to it. You can feel the movement change. All the festive decorations are being put away. Discarded Christmas trees wait for the trash collector. And so also have been put away with them our hopeful anticipations. No longer is it, “Mom, can I have a hover-board for Christmas?” Now it is, “Mom, my hover-board doesn’t really hover — and sometimes it catches on fire.” And, “I think I broke my arm.”

No longer is it, “Let us now go even unto Bethlehem and see this thing that is come to pass which the Lord has made known unto us.”
Now it is, “Away from Bethlehem! “Take the child and go to Egypt!” (of all places). This is tough. Matthew and Luke make bleakness and conflict part of the Christmas stories on purpose. Now there is no star to guide us on the way from Bethlehem. No angelic messengers announcing news of hope and new birth. But, rather, an angelic warning. There is Bedlam ahead! “Take the child and flee into Egypt. Herod’s soldiers, swords in hand, are out to get any new born child they can get their hands on. There’s a dangerous world ahead. And death.”

Whatever happened to the wise men, I wonder?
And to the shepherds after that one glorious night?
What happens when we turn away from Bethlehem to Bedlam?
From the loveliness and promise of Christmas eve and Christmas day to a world of uproar and noise and confusion, terrorist threats and political insanity, a madhouse, a place for lunatics?

The message of Christmas, if we mishear it, can seduce us into thinking that all we have in front of us is sweetness and light, you know, sugar plums and all that jazz. Or, that we ought to and that it is an unfair world that we don’t.

The people who wrote the Christmas stories were geniuses. They have given us stories that are truer than true.

Our culture wants to hand us one set of stories that are so misleading. Our tradition wants to hand us something else entirely and empower us to live that story, to make it our own.

One mistake I believe that many people make about the Christmas story, and the reason it becomes for them ultimately disappointing, is that they embrace it only at the personal level and avoid embracing it at the political level. Political here has to do with how power is used, by whom and to what ends. If we don’t embrace and embody the political aspect, we will have misunderstood the stories themselves for they have a biting political edge to them. So did the ministry of Jesus. It was not for saying, “Consider the lilies of the fields,” that they executed him.

In a similar manner we cannot turn a blind eye to the fact that these stories also have elements of darkness and conflict in them. Life is tough, and the dark
powers that run the show are exactly that — dark and in conflict with the message of peace.

The primary message of Jesus was two-fold: forgiveness and inclusiveness. So what I am about to say is not an example of religious exclusivism. Here it is: In the Christian tradition anytime we love something more than the God of Jesus — as individuals, a church, or a nation — the inevitable result is always injustice and/or violence. Darkness and conflict.

Sometimes that injustice and violence is delivered in a velvet glove. One example of this in the Christian religion is the perverted notion of what is referred to as “the prosperity gospel.” The two-fold message of this corruption is: “It is God’s deepest desire to make you rich.” Or, “If you believe the right things, nothing harmful will ever come to you.”

Often you’ll hear people say during the Christmas season, “Ah, Christmas is wonderful! I wish we could keep the Christmas spirit all year round.” I know what they mean. They mean that it would be nice if we could be nicer to each other like we seem to be at Christmas. But we don’t, and evidently can’t, stay in Bethlehem. We head out, sometimes in spite of ourselves, to our own Egypt, our own bedlam.

I do not, of course, know what is in front of you or me or us in the coming year. What I do know is that what we sometimes call “the real world” awaits us, bringing with it not only the joys and things for which we will be grateful but also tough problems and tragedies. Just as was true, no doubt, for the wise men leaving Bethlehem and the shepherds as they continued tending their flocks.

As I said, the various narratives of the birth of Jesus are sheer genius. What these stories are about is what it was that was present in Jesus that opened human lives to a new dimension of reality. What we experience in Jesus, say these stories, is not something humans cooked up but something God-given — eternity breaking into time, the divine into the lives of humans. These were not naïve people. They knew what they were doing when they told the story of the birth of Jesus in the way that they did. They did see a light shining in the darkness. They also knew that ours can be a bleak world.
They tell a story of those who have seen the star, heard the angelic chorus sing, gathered around a manger to see the face of love. But they didn’t stop there. The early Christians borrowed from their Jewish background the wisdom of a liturgical calendar. So they designated the day after Christmas as St. Stephen’s day.

Remember who Stephen was?

Stephen was the first Christian martyr. He was a lunatic sort of a man who took on the Jewish ecclesiastical establishment and who got stoned to death for his efforts.

St. Stephen’s day, the day after Christmas.

Then, the day after that in the church calendar was set aside to remember the massacre of the children — those Herod killed when he had all male children killed to get rid of that special child. This is not a literally true story. This is Matthew’s way to identify Jesus as the new Moses who will lead his followers out of bondage just as Moses had led the Children of Israel out of bondage.

This part of the story often gets lost in our being caught up with Rudolf and Santa and a star that leads shepherds to a baby in a manager. But all of this is in the story. From Bethlehem, whose dark streets shine with everlasting light, to Bedlam, with angry mobs, storming soldiers breaking into houses to murder innocent children. All overnight.

What else should we expect?

Birth is always a struggle. It has with it pain and agony and even the danger of death. This is true whether it is the birth of a child or the birth of a new idea. When something new is born, the old never gives up without a struggle.

Bedlam is part of our daily experience. There are places for us all where we are ignorant, where we fail, where we hurt, where we are confused. Following Jesus means not giving up on the light, either having faith in it or seeking to manifest it. Following Jesus means seeing the bedlam places in our lives as an opportunity to practice what he taught — love, kindness, forgiveness, inclusion.

So, what can we do about the chaos, bedlam, and darkness?
Some people become cynical and conclude that involvement in religious and spiritual practices and work is useless. I doubt there are many of those in this crowd. But, it is clear that we don’t have “peace on earth.”

I want to offer two practical suggestions or perspectives.

One of the things we can do to deal with bedlam is that we can commit ourselves to learning to live deeply, to stop being taken over by the superficiality that seeks to engulf our culture. Don’t live on the surface. Don’t confuse the edge with the essence. The sin of our time may be superficiality itself. We are in a culture that is entertaining itself to death, which causes us easily to lose sight of the rule of God that Jesus talked about and embodied. We should be mindful that the moral character of a nation is how it treats the least of its citizens.

I love the Albert Einstein line, “No problem can be solved with the same consciousness that created it.”

It’s a tough world. Someone shared with me a prayer that they offer as part of their daily practice:

“Dear God, so far today, I’ve done all right. I haven’t gossiped, and I haven’t lost my temper. I haven’t been grumpy, nasty or selfish, and I’m really glad of that.

“But in a few minutes, God, I’m going to get out of bed, and from then on, I’m probably going to need a lot of help.

“Thank you! Amen.”

I don’t know about you, but sometimes I look in the mirror and see that I don’t live within a country mile of where I profess to live. It’s because I fail to listen to the right voice, I fail to live in the light.

The other suggestion is that we can work to be very clear about our true identity and whether we are living that identity.

Who are you?
Who am I?
Who is our neighbor?
What Jesus taught is that we are who we are in God. No more. No less. As Jim Finley, someone I regard as one of my spiritual teachers, has put it to me: “I am not you. But, I am not other than you either. You are not me. But, you are not other than me either.”

If we could embrace this, we would stop hating, excluding, and killing.

Who are we in these Christmas stories?
Are we like the wise men who follow light wherever it leads them?
Do we, like them, refuse to comply with their ruler’s plot to destroy the light?
Or, are we more like Herod, ruled by our fears that someone might take our power, prestige, and possessions from us and become willing to do whatever is required, even resorting to violence to stay in control?

Are we among those who yearn for the coming of a kingdom of justice and peace and who seek peace through justice? Or, are we with those who seek peace through violence?

Where do we see the light of the world?

What would the various worlds in which we live be like if we were like Mary who said, “Let it be with me according to your will,” and were obedient to whatever role we might be given in bringing about a different kind of world?

We are meant to be changed by these stories of the birth of Jesus, his birth into a dark, dangerous and damaging world — a world full at times of bedlam. We are meant to be change agents in behalf of God in such a world. There is a line by St. Augustine that I love: “God without us will not. We without God cannot.” God will not change either the world or us without our participation.

If we have seen the star, we are called to participate in the new birth and the new world the Christmas stories proclaim.

So we make our way from Bethlehem to bedlam. But we do not go without light, guidance, and nurture if we are open to it.

Joy to the world. Let earth receive her king.