"Where is the Child?”

Matthew 2:1-15

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I don’t know about you, but one of the saddest moments of my year is after all of the presents are opened on Christmas Day, after all the wrapping paper is cleared away, the space underneath the tree is empty, and if you’re in my family, the bows are saved for another year. That moment, when it’s all done, is always such a disappointment. Now, I realize that Christmas isn’t just about the presents (I took several classes in seminary that ensures that I realize this), but for me, the waiting to open the presents (and for my family to open the ones I got them) is the best part of the season. Everything is oriented toward Christmas morning and once that is over — what else is there to look forward to?

When I was younger, I used to mentally extend the Christmas season until every single present was opened. This meant that if my grandparents in Ohio told me they had a present for me and I knew that I probably wouldn’t get to open it until I visited them in March, then I got to extend the Christmas season until that present was opened. The warmth of the Christmas season got to extend almost indefinitely.

In a world in which we constantly see bitterness and strife in the news, in the media, in our daily interactions, the feelings of Christmas often offer a reprieve from the negativity — and it’s a reprieve that’s needed universally, often regardless of faith tradition.

When I was a campus minister in Memphis, we had our Presbyterian students sit down with the students in the Muslim Student Association at Rhodes College to have a conversation about the Christmas season. This was about the time that the big Starbucks coffee cup controversy was happening, and so one of my students asked one of the Muslim students how she felt about being a Muslim in America during the Christmas season. The student responded saying, “I love Christmas time in America. I love the lights and the decorations. Everyone is just a whole lot nicer. It’s a fun time of year.”

Her response surprised me. I thought she would say that it was frustrating how prevalent the Christmas season was, how it saturated everything, how strange it was that a religion would dominate an entire month (or, let’s be honest, several months), in a country that is supposed to have a separation of Church and State. Instead, she told us that she enjoyed the Christmas season because everyone is nicer.

Christmas *is* a nice, warm time. And we would probably like to keep the feelings associated with Christmas year-round. We want the feel-goods to last forever. We want Jesus to stay a baby in his manger with Mary pondering, shepherds bowing, angels rejoicing, cattle lowing. This is a Jesus that we understand.

There’s a scene in the incredibly irreverent movie, Talladega Nights, in which Will Ferrell’s character, Ricky Bobby, is saying grace before dinner. He begins his prayer with, “Dear Lord Baby Jesus…” His wife cuts in to say, “You know, sweetie, Jesus did grow up.” Ricky Bobby responds with, “Look, I like the Christmas Jesus best.”

I think many of us, whether or not we’d like to admit it, prefer the six pound, eight ounce Christmas Jesus best. We prefer to remember him as a baby, because if we take a step back and remember how this story continues, we know that it gets ugly, quickly, and today’s text is one of our first clues as to how violence and oppression will feature in the life of the Prince of Peace.

Today’s text portrays the familiar story of the Magi visiting Herod first and then finding the Christ Child and presenting him with gifts. The text continues, however, and shows a darker side of the Christmas story. As soon as the magi leave, Joseph is warned in a dream that Herod will try to find the child and destroy him so that Herod’s power is not in jeopardy. Right away, Jesus’s life is in danger. Right away, even when he is a tiny, helpless infant, before he takes his first steps, before he has memorized Torah, right away, his very existence threatens the powers that be in Judea.

When Mary gazed down at her infant son, and pondered all of the wonders of that night and of the prior nine months, did she have any inkling as to how much danger her son would be in throughout his life? Her song in the Magnificat indicates that she knows that her child will challenge the status quo, that the humble will be lifted up; the hungry will be fed, and the rich will go without, and while, yes, for those things to happen, the mighty will have to be brought down, but did she *know* how quickly her child would pose a threat to the powerful? Maybe. Maybe not.

But perhaps the magi knew. Gold, frankincense, and myrrh - strange gifts for a baby — but maybe the Magi, the Gentile astrologers, the people on the margins, recognized who this baby was. Perhaps they saw through Herod’s instructions. The cosmos were changing. A new star had appeared in the sky. Understanding the ways of the world the way that they did, they could foresee that this wouldn’t end well for this child. And so they brought gifts for the journey. Gold, a symbol of royalty. Frankincense, a symbol of divinity. And, finally, myrrh, a symbol of death.

Strange gifts for a baby. But this is no ordinary baby. This is the Messiah, the one for whom Israel has been waiting. The one for whom the entire world has been longing. These gifts from the magi point forward to who Jesus is and what is going to happen to him. They force us, the readers, to look up from the manger and to look forward to the cross.

In her book, “Kneeling in Bethlehem,” poet Ann Weems describes the journey the Holy Family will take into Egypt. She writes,

Into the wild and painful cold of the starless winter night

came the refugees,

slowly making their way to the border.

The man, stooped from age or anxiety,

hurried his small family through the wind.

Bearded and dark, his skin rough and cracked from the cold,

his frame looming large in spite of the slumped shoulders:

He looked like a man who could take care of whatever

came at them

from the dark.

Unless, of course, there were too many of them.

One man he could handle…two, even…,

but a border patrol…

they wouldn’t have a chance.

His eyes, black and alert,

darted from side to side, then over his shoulder,

Had they been seen?

Had they been heard?

Every rustle of wind, every sigh from the child,

sent terror through his chest.

Was this the way?

Even the stars had been unkind –

had hidden themselves in the ink of night

so that the man could not read their way.

Only the wind…was it enough?

Only the wind and his innate sense of direction…

What kind of cruel judgment would that be,

to wander in circles through the night?

Or to safely make their way to the border

only to find the authorities waiting for them?

He glanced at the young woman, his bride.

No more than a child herself,

she nuzzled their newborn, kissing his neck.

She looked up, caught his eye, and smiled.

Oh, how the homelessness had taken its toll on her.

Her eyes were red, her young face lined,

her lovely hair matted from inattention,

her clothes stained from milk and baby,

her hands chapped from the raw wind of winter.

She’d hardly had time to recover from childbirth

when word had come that they were hunted,

and they fled with only a little bread,

the remaining wine,

and a very small portion of cheese.

Suddenly, the child began to make small noises.

The man drew his breath in sharply;

the woman quietly put the child to breast.

Fear…long dread-filled moments…

Huddled, the family stood still in the long silence.

At last the man breathed deeply again,

Reassured they had not been heard.

and into the night continued

Mary and Joseph and the Babe.[[1]](#footnote-2)

It isn’t pleasant to think of the Holy Family in this way, to imagine how quickly the wonders of Christmas Eve changed into the realities of raising the Messiah in a hostile environment. The flight into Egypt is only a few verses long, but it reveals the kind of life that Jesus will lead in order to bring reconciliation to the world.

While it is tempting to stay in the wonder of Christmas, to avoid the ugliness of crucifixion, we will never fully understand the emotion and meaning of Easter morning, if we stay in Bethlehem. We need to follow the Holy Family as they become refugees, crossing a border in the night to save their child. We need to follow this child as he grows in wisdom and strength, memorizing Scripture and learning from the rabbis. We need to follow him as he calls his disciples, as he heals the sick and feeds the hungry. We need to follow him to Jerusalem, waving palm branches and shouting Hosanna! And we will need to follow him all the way to the cross. We will never get to Easter morning, if we stay in Bethlehem.

Susan Polly, our flower arranger, poinsettia procurer extraordinaire, came into my office a few weeks ago apologizing for the flowers that we had in the sanctuary the day before.

She explained that when she had ordered the flower arrangement for that Sunday, she asked for red and white flowers. The florist took those instructions and went with carnations and lilies. And I am allergic to lilies. Typically, when it is lily season in the church, florists will remove the stamen from the lilies so that they don’t have such a strong smell. Susan knew that lilies triggered my allergies and so she apologized for any irritation I might have felt due to their smell.

And while, yes, I did notice the lilies and their smell, I also thought they offered an interesting juxtaposition. That Sunday was the first Sunday for all of our poinsettias on display. I loved the interesting contrast between the abundance of red poinsettias, a symbol for Christmas, with the white lilies, a symbol for Easter, poking through. The presence of the lilies reminded me *why* we were waiting in Advent. We wait through the darkness of Advent, and we will continue to wait through the lengthening days of Lent later on this Spring, because we know the light of resurrection. We know that for us is born in Bethlehem, the Savior, the Messiah, Emmanuel, God with us, God for us.

O come let us adore him — not because he’s adorable, but to adore him because he will save us all.

All praise be to God.

Amen.

1. “The Refugees.” Ann Weems, *Kneeling In Bethlehem*. Pg 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)