



Advent IV - December 23, 2012  
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*The God Who Heals:  
The God Who Suffers*  
Matthew 2: 1-23

How many of you have continued to reflect this week upon the shooting in Newtown? I did. And it struck me as nothing short of God's providence that our children were scheduled to lead us in worship last Sunday. All of us, including myself, were caught up in the grief of that moment. And to have our children lead us in worship that morning...it was an act of joyful defiance against the Evil One. The musical was great, of course...but more than that, it was a declaration of life in Christ. And when the balloons rained down from the balcony during the final song, it was just perfect. If you missed it, you missed a holy, healing moment.

Which doesn't mean that we still don't have grief... and questions. One man wrote to me: "Since Friday morning I have been in a state of shock over how such an evil act could take place to harm innocent children... This event has hit me like a stone wall."

How many read my special edition e-bulletin last Monday? Let me quote a few lines:

The first time you really digested the story, did it hit you as hard as it hit me? Little children massacred by abject evil. How can anyone do such a thing? Why does such evil exist in the world? What must be done so that children in a tiny town—and all children everywhere—can be safe and evil can be manacled and held at bay?

The tiny town was Bethlehem. The abject evil murderer was Herod the Great. And the only reason that Jesus was not among the victims is that his parents fled for their lives to the place that Jews often turned for refuge... Egypt.

The "slaughter of the innocents" in Bethlehem is not a pleasant part of the Christmas story. We often exclude it from our Advent readings. But here, in the shadow of Newtown, and in a season when we are speaking of healing, it could hardly be more appropriate. So, this morning we take a break from John and turn to Matthew. The wise men from the East have arrived in Jerusalem and appeared before paranoid Herod, asking where they might find the new king. His advisors inform them that the prophet Micah foretold Bethlehem as the birthplace of Messiah. That's where we pick up the reading. [Read 7-23]

Most of you have beautiful olive wood nativity sets featuring this: Magi worshipping at the manger of Jesus. Sorry to disappoint, but it never happened. According to Matthew, the magi were led to a house in Bethlehem, not a stable, to find a toddler, not a newborn. After Jesus' birth, Joseph and Mary apparently rented a flat in Bethlehem and stuck around for a couple years. That's how long it was since the magi first saw the star, devised their plans and made their journey to Jerusalem. And after they finally do discover Jesus... they are warned in a dream not to return to Herod, so they depart by another route.

Herod was furious at the betrayal. This guy had no problem murdering anyone who threatened his power, including three of his own sons and two of his wives. Augustus once said of him, "It is safer to be Herod's pig than to be his son." Since Herod could not be sure which of the toddlers in Bethlehem posed a threat to his throne, he ordered that all boys, two years and under, be eliminated. Bethlehem was a small town. This probably didn't amount to more than 15 or 20 children—20 children... sound familiar?—but even one would have been ghastly.

When we read of another ghastly act of violence against children, the same, painful question springs from our soul. What question? Why? And if we are spiritual persons, the question is, "Why, God? Why, God, do you allow this to occur? Why do you allow violence and evil, pain and suffering to occur in your world?" Or considering our sermon series, *The God Who Heals*, the question might be, "Why does God have to heal in the first place? Why does he even allow the pain that requires healing? Why not just do away with the pain and be done with it?"

The answer to that depends upon your world view. If you are Buddhist or Hindu, the answer is Karma. Every bad thing that happens to you in this life is a consequence of your misbehavior in a previous life or punishment for this one. If you suffer a terrible illness... if you suffer a violent death, whatever your age... you brought it upon yourself and you must endure the suffering in order to be reincarnated to a higher state. If you are Muslim, the answer is: "Insha'Allah"... the will of God. Everything that happens is the will of God. Sickness, terrible acts of violence... Insha'Allah! Allah wills it and who are we to question Allah? And if you are an Atheist, the answer is... there is no answer. There is no God, no reason, no purpose to anything in life. As Richard Dawkins puts it, we dance to the music of our DNA. To ask "why" anything happens is pointless. It just happens—and it has no meaning at all in a universe in which good and evil mean exactly the same thing—nothing. A universe, by the way, that doesn't know you exist and in which you also mean nothing, too.

So what is the Christian answer to "Why?" The classical response is "free will." God created human beings with the ability to choose, including the ability to choose to love a loving God. Humans misused their free will, rebelled against God and sin entered the world. All that is evil, broken, sick and painful is a symptom of

this sin. And God allows it to continue for the time being because the only other option would be to force His will upon us; take away our free will and demand our obedience...which destroys the possibility of real relationship. If I have no choice but to love and obey God, it isn't really love, is it? I'm just a robot.

That's the best answer to "why" that classical theology has been able to offer. And honestly, it is not as logically satisfying as some of the other answers. If the Hindus and Buddhists are right, the people who were murdered had it coming to them because of their behavior in previous lives. If the Muslims are right, it was God's will that such terror occur and who are we to question God? If Atheists are right, this is just evolution—survival of the fittest. But Christians reply, "There is a disease in the world called sin; there is a spiritual enemy called Satan. Terrible things happen that break the heart of God yet for a time, he allows it."

The Christian God's answer to the existence of sin may not seem entirely satisfying, but when we come to the Christian God's response to evil, there is none to surpass it. How does our God respond to suffering and violence and pain? We get a hint from this story.

Matthew did not have to include this story. No other gospel writer did. It certainly doesn't answer the vexing "Why?" question. And frankly, we might be surprised by the story... and a little disappointed in a God who puts his own Son at such risk. Surely the Almighty can do better? True, an angel warns Joseph of the danger and they are able to flee for their lives. But is that the best God can do? Why not strike Herod dead? Why not stymie his murderous schemes? Why not have the soldiers who come to Bethlehem to kill the boys, meet the angels instead, like the shepherds did? Convert and come to the house to worship Jesus like the magi did? Wouldn't that make a better story? And make God look a little more godly?

And even after Herod is dead, the Holy Family is still at risk. They are told in a dream to return home because the evil king is dead. Then, they are told, "No... wait... don't go back to Bethlehem after all; head north. The new king is as bad as the old one." So, didn't God know that in the first place? Wouldn't it have been just as easy to send them straight to Nazareth? If this story teaches us anything, it is that Jesus and his family were not magically protected from the evil that was at work. They had to flee and flee again, changing course day by day. If they had not, Matthew seems to say, baby Jesus might have been a victim as well.

If we read this story looking for a divine, protective bubble around the Holy Family, we will be disappointed. So, why does Matthew include this story? To demonstrate the unique response of Yahweh to the problem of evil and pain. How does Yahweh respond? He enters into it! He embraces it! He joins us in our suffering. He put on human flesh, came to earth, became one of us and shared the worst of evil that the sinful world could dish out. He may have dodged the bullet that night, but ultimately, evil caught up with Jesus... which, of course, was

the plan. And when the sinless Son of God hung dying on a cross, never had such an injustice been done! And never more clearly did God say, "I will not explain to you why I allow evil to exist at this time. But I will do what no God has ever done. I will receive the brunt of that evil against myself... and I will defeat it!"

How do other religions respond to pain and suffering? The Hindu gods—there are millions of them—reply, "Leave them alone; let them suffer. If you interfere with their suffering, you upset Karma and prevent them from having a better next life." The Muslim response is similar: "It is God's will. If Allah chooses to visit pain upon someone, who are we to interfere?" The response of the Atheists? "That's life. Yes, we should try and prevent it from occurring again, but we live in a dog-eat-dog-world."

But the Christian response has always been--starting with this very story: enter into the suffering. Share the pain. Mourn with those who mourn, grieve with those who grieve. Shoulder their burden carry them to a place of shalom. This is why, when Tsunamis strike predominantly Muslim and Hindu countries, it is Christian aid groups that descend upon the land and Christian churches that blanket the stricken people with millions of dollars in aid. Because our God's answer to evil and pain, as long as it exists in this world, is for His people to enter into it, to share it, to take it upon themselves... exactly as God's Son entered into our pain and suffering and took it upon Himself.

How does the God Who Heals, heal something like this? In part, by the people of the Crucified One embracing the pain and loss of the victims. We don't try to come up with answers. We are not quick to explain. There are no good answers to this kind of senseless tragedy. But we lament with them. We mourn with them. We pray for them. And we memorialize their loss by living, by holding our kids close and loving them more intentionally. We celebrate life...which is why last Sunday's service was so perfect.

The unique response of the Christian God toward evil and pain is participation. Like no other God, our God enters into the suffering of His people. But there is Another unique response of the Christian God toward evil and pain. What is it? Forgiveness! We don't see it in this story, but as I said, Jesus' death penalty was only deferred. Page ahead in the gospel and you will discover the baby who dodged death hanging from a cross as a man...dying a sacrificial, atoning death. And as he hangs there, what are the words he cries out? "Father, vindicate me! Father, avenge me! Father, destroy my destroyers!" Is that what we hear? No. "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do!"

But it is easier said than done, isn't it? One man who wrote me admitted that he cannot find it in himself to forgive the shooter. And when we read about the Herods and Hitlers and Stalins of the world, we immediately identify with that deep emotion. What they have done is so awful, so repugnant... if that is not unforgiveable, what is? And yet, Jesus' cry from the cross echoes still. "...forgive!"

In obedience to this cry, the Amish community cared for the family of the man who murdered their schoolchildren. In obedience, Robbie Parker who lost his daughter in Newtown, stood to address the media:

<http://www.godtube.com/watch/?v=W776ZWNX>

From the start, Jesus preached a counter-cultural message: “Love your enemies, pray for your enemies, go the extra mile for your enemies, turn the other cheek to your enemies.” There is nothing about this that feels good, right or just. Not at the time. Not at such a time as this. Our hearts cry for justice... for vengeance, even. But Jesus says, “Yes, justice is required. But leave that to me. If you drink the draught of vengeance, it will only poison and enslave you. You... forgive; I will help you do that. And then trust me to make all things right.”

Christian forgiveness has nothing to do with the offender. We do not offer it because they repent or ask for it...and certainly not because they deserve it. We do not naively assume that their behavior will change nor do we subject ourselves to further abuse. And we cannot do it in our own strength. But because we serve a God who entered into our pain—and who offered forgiveness to his persecutors, and who called us to forgive so that we may be set free, and who gives us His Holy Spirit so that we can do the impossible, and who promises that, one day, He will ensure that justice is done—because of all those things, we forgive.

In this season when we are talking about the God who heals, there are I daresay hundreds of people in this room who are sickened in some way because they cling to their hatred and bitterness towards someone who terrorized their life in some way. You will never be healed unless you can relinquish your desire for vengeance and your love of bitterness. So, this morning, we will pray together that God will bring his healing gift of forgiveness. Let us pray.

What is it that you need to forgive? Who is it that you hate; to what bitterness do you cling? What terrible story do you need to tell over and over again to anyone who will listen? Would you dare ask God to take away your hatred and bitterness? Would you dare ask him for the healing power of his forgiveness?

## Sermon Questions

- **REFLECT & APPLY TOGETHER:** Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.
- **PRAY TOGETHER:** Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for, and lay one concern before the Lord.
- **DIG DEEPER**
  1. Pastor Mark shared how different world views deal with the issue of evil and sickness in the world. Can you review them? Why does he suggest that Christianity's response is least satisfying, apart from atheism?
  2. What is the Christian RESPONSE to evil and sickness in the world? Why is it different than the others? Why is it MOST satisfying? What is the ultimate point that Christianity can make on this topic?
  3. Does it bother you that Jesus' family is not safer? That they need to flee and change their plans several times to avoid the danger that, surely, God could just eliminate or deal with?
  4. How does the topic of unforgiveness speak into our theme of healing?