

Salvation: Allowing Our Suffering to Be Transformed
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Second Sunday after Christmas ~ Year A

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I don't imagine most of you came to church on this 11th day of Christmas eager to hear about slaughtered children or fleeing for one's life. Whatever happened to eleven pipers piping and three gold rings? But here we are, so let's dive in.

Some of you might have noticed that I've hung a sermon illustration on the wall over there. It's a hand-me-down print from my daughter that usually hangs on the wall of my bedroom. It's called 'Rest on the Flight into Egypt' and was done by the French painter Luc Olivier Merson in the 19th century. This is what I see the first thing in the morning and the last thing at night most days.

It's not exactly a cheerful image. Those transients out there in the middle of nowhere look mighty uncomfortable, small, and exposed. But, in sort of an odd way, I find the picture comforting, even hopeful. The Light of God gently radiates through his son, meaning they are not alone. They can get some rest. Their campfire, though low, still burns. Even the Sphinx seems to be drawn toward the faint light of the stars. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. Muted as it may be.

It's pretty jarring to have the sweet joy of Jesus' birth story followed almost immediately by the horror of Herod killing baby boys and the holy family escaping into Egypt. Since this gruesome episode is not part of history recorded elsewhere, it must have another purpose.

You'll recall that Matthew's gospel begins with a long genealogy to establish Jesus's place in the house of David. His account shows the birth of Jesus -- and thus all that follows -- is an integral part of the story of the Jewish people. Matthew wrote for a Jewish Christian audience and repeatedly picked up threads of Jewish history, theology, and lore to show that Jesus was indeed the prophesied Messiah.

Just in today's brief text there are references to the prophets Hosea and Jeremiah, and to an oral tradition about the messiah being called a Nazorean. On a broad scale, the slaughter of the innocents can be seen as a parallel to Pharaoh killing all Hebrew baby boys at the time of Moses' birth. And the holy family taking refuge in Egypt can be seen as a mirror image of the Exodus. These sorts of allusions continue throughout Matthew's gospel.

Also, by the time Matthew was writing, he'd lived through the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. So his gospel also foreshadows the trauma he knew was just over the horizon for the Jewish nation at the time of Jesus' birth.

Maybe even more importantly for us today, these are *archetypal* stories that point to the brutality we've built into human culture throughout the ages. There are Herods in every era and in every part of the world, sad to say. These are also *theological* stories that reveal how God would have us respond to the violence and oppression in our world.

Today's stories seem particularly relevant in these troubled times. Images of the continuing slaughter of children in Gaza on the nightly news and the gun violence killing American children day in and out make our human violence all too real. To say nothing of the more than 120 million refugees in the world today.

I don't know about you, but in my relative comfort and privilege, I can barely imagine what it would be like to have to flee your home and perhaps your homeland in the midst of disaster. Whether that catastrophe was caused by humans or by nature. But I'm pretty sure it would involve plenty of hardship and suffering – before, during, and after.

I think Matthew includes these hard stories because, simply put, I believe Jesus came among us, in no small part, to show us how to suffer. To show us how to allow God's grace to bring us through. He came to teach us, right from the get-go, how to abide in God's love in the midst of whatever pain life brings, so that pain, we ourselves, and human culture can be transformed.

It's our second nature to battle against suffering, and to fight those we blame for it. But our first nature – the nature of God in us – is to endure suffering with patient trust that new life is coming and to forgive those who inflict it. Abiding in God's love empowers us to endure suffering without retaliation or without even passing it on to innocent bystanders.

Spiritual writer Richard Rohr reminds us that pain that isn't transformed will inevitably be passed on. In his book *The Universal Christ* he says that salvation is not a favor Jesus effects for certain individuals in a heavenly ledger somewhere. It is, instead, the full map for the universal human journey in God. Rohr uses salvation and transformation almost interchangeably.

As popular as the word resilience is today for describing recovery from trauma, I think it actually pretty much misses the point. Resilience is about bouncing back to where and how you were before. While salvation, transformation, is about being made wholly new, and amazingly, even more alive by what you pass through with God's grace.

So again, we have Matthew's beautiful, hopeful nativity story immediately followed by fear and sorrow and hardship. This is a pattern we see throughout the gospels. Jesus was baptized then sent out by the Holy Spirit into the desert to go hungry and be tempted by Satan. Jesus impressed the people in his hometown with his preaching, but they still reject him, even want to throw him off a cliff. He has a mountain top experience and then immediately sets off toward Jerusalem, knowing he'll be killed. Even rose gardens can have nasty thorns, but human life is way more torturous than it would be, and need be, if we'd only respond to suffering, and even violence, with God's love.

That doesn't mean being a doormat. It means knowing when to walk away and when to stand your ground – in both public and private situations. And it means standing your ground with a stance of mercy and forgiveness. It means never retaliating in kind.

The Christian peace activist John Dear says that even as our task as followers of Jesus is always non-cooperation with the evils in the world, we must "live according to the nonviolent Christ we have met, and . . . adhere to his teachings on universal love and active nonviolence." Just today we heard Paul say in his letter to the Ephesians that God "chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love."

Undoubtedly easier said than done! So Jesus taught us to live the "way of the cross." He taught us to bear suffering by clinging steadfastly to God's love and trusting in God's promise of new life. We *all* really do have that capacity within us. It's God given. And Jesus came himself and sent the Holy Spirit to re-activate that grace within us, as it were.

I work with a team at Inside Out Reentry to offer groups in Acceptance and Commitment Training – or ACT – to people returning from prison. Most all of them have suffered repeated trauma, and many also suffer from serious mental illness and/or substance abuse disorders. Their lives are mostly extremely challenging, even without having suffered the oppression of life in prison, often for years and years.

The Acceptance part of ACT has to do with learning to accept – to willingly receive – life as it comes. To accept what happens in our *outer* and in our *inner* worlds, moment by moment. In ACT we learn to be with what is, no matter how painful. We do this in a variety of ways, including contemplative, mindfulness exercises.

The miracle of course is that when we truly do accept what is, what changes. Change is the stuff of life. It doesn't always come as quickly as we want or as dramatically, but change does happen if we will allow things to be as they are. Richard Rohr tells us that the suffering we most want to avoid is likely the nearest doorway to our own transformation. Again, if we will just allow it.

Once we begin to more fully accept ourselves and our lives moment to moment, we're much more free to work effectively with the Commitment part of ACT – which is committing to make choices and take actions based on our values. Which, for most of us, are rooted in our commitment to follow Christ.

As I close now, I invite you to gaze at – to take in through the eyes of your heart – this image of the flight into Egypt. Immerse yourself in the bleak reality portrayed there, along with the glimmer of light shining in the darkness.

As you sit with that juxtaposition, hear again a paraphrase of Paul's prayer to the Ephesians, offered now for each one of us:

I pray that . . . God . . . may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation . . . so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the **hope** to which God has called you, what are the **riches** of God's glorious inheritance . . . and what is the immeasurable greatness of God's **power** for us who trust in it.

Amen.