

The Last Word

When people say that the Bible is just stories from a time that has nothing to do with ours today, I can only laugh.

Think about it.

A scheming, self-absorbed, power-hungry, spoiled brat of a man, beholden to a foreign dictator, sets out to destroy whatever threatens his claim to power.

Sound familiar?

The Bible is the story of humanity.

Then and now.

It's a story where the names may change, but the faces look strikingly familiar.

And so it is today, as we are invited not only to examine, but also to choose, whether we will take the path of Herod in our life, or the path of Joseph.

Herod is after all, the sensible one.

He knows how the world works.

He believes most people are fools.

There is a well-known Christmas poem about the characters we deal with today.

The author has this to say about Herod:

Herod is a man who "thinks his way straight to violence, and ultimately to his own damnation.

As he stewes over the failure of the masses to act 'in conformity with Nature and Necessity,' he sees the birth of Christ not as a threat to his kingship or as the great gift of the divine entering into this world.

He sees in this miraculous birth just another troublesome and politically unstable superstition among the common people.

'Why can't they see,' he asks, 'that the notion of a finite God is absurd?

Because it is.

And suppose, just for the sake of argument, that it isn't?

That this story is true?

That this child is in some inexplicable way both God and Man?

That he grows up, lives, and dies, without committing a single sin?

Would that make life any better?

On the contrary, it would make it far, far worse.'

And so, he concludes, 'I refuse to be taken in.'

As he orders the massacre of the innocents. Jeff Reimer, 12/26/20, Commonweal, reflecting on Auden's, For the Time Being.

And the sentence we should pay attention to is the one where Herod asks what difference it would make if Jesus lives his life without committing any sin.

When you hear that line, what do you think about?

Do you think that Jesus went through his whole life without telling a lie, or having sexual thoughts, or engaging in something else that we commonly call "sin" these days?

That is certainly how I first read that line, but perhaps that's not what a "sinless" life is about.

Perhaps Jesus lives a sinless life because every day and in every way he trusts in God.

He enters every day of his life open to the truth that God is present in this world.

And a life lived in that trust, while it may encounter many difficulties, and much opposition, is the only life truly worth living.

Such a life is terrifying to Herod.

Herod, like me, and perhaps like some of you too, is a control freak.

He is a plotter and a schemer.

A person who believes that he knows what's best for himself and for the world.

And yet that way of thinking always leads to one certain end:

It always leads to the slaughter of the innocents.

Don't take my word for it.

Just look!

Look at the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq.

At the Proud Boys promoting fascism.

And the virulent racism seemingly everywhere.

Look at how our insistence that peace comes through strength, justice through war, economic prosperity by rewarding the rich: all this nonsense brings Herod back to life every day, year after year.

Herod is very much like Flannery O'Connor's famous character, the Misfit, in her short story about a family whose car breaks down in a remote area.

Much to their misfortune, a group of escaped prisoners captures them, and one by one, for the pure thrill of it, kills each of the family members, until only the grandmother is left.

Grandma pleads with the one called Misfit — in the name of Jesus — to spare her life.

And Misfit responds not with ridicule, but with an insight that cuts to the bone.

He says of Christ,

“If He did what He said, then it’s nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow Him.

And if He didn’t, then it’s nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got the best way you can.

By killing somebody.

Or burning down his house.

Or doing some other meanness to him.”

Herod massacres the innocents, and justifies it by claiming he’s protecting the natural order of things.

Misfit massacres the innocents for pleasure.

But no matter the motivation, the innocents are dead.

There must be a better way.

And that better way, in today's gospel, is the way of Joseph.

Joseph, the role model whom Jesus will follow, trusts God in all things.

He heeds his dreams.

He trusts, every day, the soft still voice of God directing his life.

He's had practice at this.

Beginning with the scandal of Mary's unorthodox pregnancy, he follows God's nudge, becoming a refugee, an illegal immigrant, with his young family.

And he keeps listening.

And following.

Securing the life of the Savior of the world.

The life that will in due time be given for the world.

The life that shall become and is today and shall forever be, the life of the world.

If we are serious about our faith, if we choose the path of Joseph rather than the path of Herod or of the Misfit, then we are invited into a grand adventure the likes of which the world rarely sees.

It is the adventure that Jesus summons each of us to.

In the words of the wonderful mystic, Thomas Keating,

“The power of the stars is nothing compared to the energy of a person whose will is freed . . . and thus enabled to create the cosmos together with God.

God’s top priority is the creation of a world in which the goods of the earth are equitably distributed.

Where no one is forgotten or left out.

Where no one can rest until everyone has enough to eat and the oppressed have been liberated; until justice is the norm among the nations and religions of the world.

Until then, even the joy of a transforming union with God is incomplete.

The commitment to the spiritual journey isn’t a commitment simply to joy, it’s a commitment to assuming responsibility for the whole human family, its needs and destiny.

We are not our own.

We belong to everyone else.” Modified.

These truths are echoed by long-time contemplative and Nuns on the Bus founder, Sister Simone Campbell:

“Our call to do our part is the heart of the gospel message.

We need to pitch in.

Listen to others.

And stay open to the Spirit.

We are the ones who are sent out.

The gospel of love won't be experienced unless we live the deeply contemplative truth that our prayer leads to community, which leads to action to heal this fractured world.

It is those whom we encounter, those who break open our hearts, who keep us faithful.

Yet only then, and only together, can we know our existence as one vibrant organism — created at every moment — by the Divine.

This is the source of hope beyond our wildest understanding."Modified.

We face profound challenges in our local community, in our nation, and in the world.

This coming year will see great debates about how we should care, and for whom.

As we face the challenges of pandemic, economic disparity, and racial injustice, can we listen to the still soft voice that moved dear Joseph?

The same voice that led Jesus into the desert?

That led him onto the cross?

Can we listen to our better angels?

Can we give each other the benefit of the doubt?

So much depends on our answers to these questions.

Indeed, perhaps everything does.

amen+

