

Kankakee Presbyterian Church
Matthew 2: 13-23
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Listening in a Violent World
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I find myself longing for some good news sometimes. The news cycle on the television is remarkably depressing, no matter what political perspective you come from. There are wars and rumors of wars, epidemics of violence, especially here in Chicago area, there are death notices and refugee crises. On and on, there are disappointing and disregulating stories all around us. And there are disfiguring and deeply discouraging stories from our own lives that leave us longing for more. The trauma, grief, loss, anxiety, fear, isolation and hopelessness that pervade our inner lives are just as disheartening, if not more so than what's on the news. In truth, there are things that we keep to ourselves. Inner turmoils, discomforts, questions that we dare not share even with our closest loved ones, for these things are so personal, private and heart wrenching that we scarcely admit to ourselves how scared we are. The things that we fear sharing with others indicate the things we can't admit to ourselves. The world is a scary place and we delude ourselves when we believe otherwise.

Advent, the season leading up to Christmas reminds us that the season is not really about presents or all of the holiday stress. The season is meant to be about Jesus, love, and God with us – Emmanuel. But Advent itself is not exclusively about Jesus and awaiting the coming birth of Jesus, it is about awaiting God's intervention in the world. God's final redemption of the world. It is about our own rebirth. About the life that we are meant to live and lead in this life. God's intervention into our world because God is near.

That's right, God is near. Not far away. God is always listening, and not in the Santa Claus way – keeping track of our wrongs and rights – ultimately leading to judgment. God is near and waiting to respond. Waiting for our hearts to turn towards Him, so that he may engage us. Our passage today

demonstrates this story, God drawing close to humanity for one goal – redemption.

Emmanuel – God with us. And why? Because God loves us. Yes, it is true. God loves you. God loves me. God loves us all. So much so that God came down to this world in the form of a little baby – a human person – to grow into a future big person. For what? Salvation. Identification. God is not absent from the human existence. Indeed, God saw our suffering so much so that God came down to our world to experience it. To be one with humanity. To know us, the creation, intimately and confidently in a way never seen before. We talk a lot about pride in our world. Pride can be seen as a very negative subject. Ancient writers frequently saw pride as an evil part of our humanity. As Proverbs 16: 18 says, “Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall.” And St. Paul would speak of boasting not in ourselves or our accomplishments, rather boasting in Christ and our sufferings. So should we have pride in our accomplishments? Are not our accomplishments God's gifts and power working through us? These are valid questions and concerns, but there is another way of understanding pride. Pride as frequently used in the LGBTQ community conversation. This pride is not about accomplishment or success, rather it is about acknowledging human dignity and self-worth. It is about recognition of who we are and identification with others. Acceptance of who we are and who we have been called to be. Jesus, coming into our world – this is the essence of pride – togetherness, solidarity in pain and identification in indignity. God came into our world in order to identify with us. To have pride in us, in our humanity. God knew the creation intimately but it is through Jesus that God came to feel the weight of our humanness and acknowledge our preciousness. God has pride for you. Solidarity with you in all your struggles.

For God drew close to humanity at a time when the world needed help. Salvation was and is an ever present need – and God responded. Scripture more often than not defines salvation in terms of peace, healing, conversion, restitution, justice and behavior change. That's a lot of stuff. Think of it this way, salvation is not a “get out of hell free card.” Salvation is not taking you from all the bad stuff and

having a life that is free and clear. In fact, salvation is more about our inner state of being rather than an outward expression. At the time, the Jewish people were being dominated by the Roman world. Our story takes this idea, the idea that people can be limited and subjugated by the powerful and says, “Yes it is a Roman world but it is a Jewish universe.” It is God's universe. We remember the kids song – he's got the whole world in his hand. You and me sister in his hand. All of us are in the hands of God. And those eternal and invisible hands became visual and tangible in the baby Jesus. Flesh and blood, spirit and fire. The story itself is beautiful – of how God interacts and enters our world and the deep meaning behind the narrative that all too often becomes just a preamble for present giving.

The story of Jesus' birth tends to get glorified as a microcosm of the peaceable kingdom. You know that painting yes? Edward Hicks in 1834 painted the quintessential painting of what the Peaceable Kingdom would look like. Even tones, lion and lamb together, a bland portrait without distress. Everything is meant to be beautiful and wonderful. This is what we think Christmas and the birth of Jesus should be. Perfect, holy, and wonderful. It is calm, serene, and lovely. Remember the famous line, “baby Jesus no crying he makes.” Everything working together for God's good in the world, for our salvation. Inner and external peace.

And yet, it is false. The real narrative, the real the background is terrible. Jesus was born poor in a country town and he was born into a violent world. He was born to a teenager, in poverty, for all of our sakes I hope Jesus cried a lot! But politically the world he was born into was a mess. Herod the king was a madman. He had all children two and under killed because of the possibility that one of them might become king. Herod is everything we fear about dictators and despots. The show *Game of Thrones* had a mad king in it, who ruthlessly killed his enemies. Herod was a real life mad king. He was not a fantasy, not a joke, not a meme. The real Herod was testified to in Josephus' *War of the Jews*. And in Dio Cassius' *Roman History*. Herod was born in Petra in Jordan and would be considered of Arab descent, though Jewish. His father was a wealthy man who had associations with Marc Antony

and Julius Caesar. Julius Caesar appointed him tetrarch of Judea and gave him Roman citizenship, thus making him a Roman. In 40 BCE the Parthians invaded Judea and Herod fled to Rome. The senate made him King of the Jews and he and his successors waged a war till AD 37 to reclaim Judea for Rome. Herod had an eye for wealth and worked hard to build up infrastructure in the land, basically establishing the Port of Caesarea. If you go to Caesarea, you will see the remains of a large palace. The palace is right on the water of the Mediterranean sea, a salt water sea; and there is the remains of what was a pool, but not just any pool, a fresh water pool surrounded by salt water. Herod was wealthy and famous in the way pop stars are wealthy today, throwing money around. Though he was productive and conquered lands and peoples all around him and attempted to restore wealth to Judea. Herod suffered from madness. He was deceived by his sister Salome's schemes and believed his wife to be a cheater and ended up murdering his wife and love Marianne, her two sons, her brother, her grandfather, and her mother. Eventually his violence lost him the affection of Augustus Caesar and before his death he murdered those children in and around Bethlehem. He even had people killed on the day of his execution so that none should forget his power.

So that's a lot of violence. A lot of violence from one powerful man. And to think that all that violence was directed towards a small child, a baby in a manger. Our passage today is a familiar one, and yet we don't talk about it very often. We use it as background and as a tool to get the Holy Family to Egypt and back to Nazareth to begin Jesus' priestly journey. Admittedly, it is a hard story to swallow. Probably because it is so real. And it connects our world today with that of the past. You see, violence is endemic – meaning a part of all of our stories and an epidemic – an all over nightmare for our world, that shows no signs of ceasing.

Perhaps it is the violence against children that makes it us so uncomfortable. Innocence lost in order to save the life of one child. Even though that child is to become the savior of all humanity. We wonder as to why God allows such violence against others? In most of our lives we live with the

tension of why? Why do tragedies strike us? Why does the world live out this cycle of violence? Why does God not intervene? Or why does God allow these things to happen to ourselves, others, and this world? The Hebrew Scriptures cause us moments of pause as we reflect on the moments that describe God as punitive and capricious. God commands the Israelites to subdue other groups. Commands that animals and people be wiped off the planet. And yes, it is people who perform the task but it is God who permits it and encourages it. And here in our passage we have a revisitation of the theme of violence between humans for which there is no rescue. Violence comes to the most innocent and the most vulnerable. So we pause in this moment to remember those babies and children who were lost at the hands of violence, a violence unstopped by God.

This past year one of the stories that struck a cord with many people was the story of the murder of AJ Freund. A little boy, 5 years of age who lived a horrible life. His mother and father abused him to degrees that we seldom recognize publicly. His life was an unmitigated horror story. And eventually his mother and father took his life, which though violent, may actually have been a blessing, releasing him from his suffering. The aftermath of this incident is that many people looked for someone to blame. First we blame the parents, obviously and justifiably. Then DCFS for not stepping in, not removing him from that home. But really, the case opens our eyes to what goes on behind closed doors. No neighbors came to his rescue, he lived in the fairly wealthy town of Crystal Lake. Seemingly, no one did anything. But maybe nothing could have been done. Maybe. Maybe. The questions remains, why? What for? What could have been done to stop this tragedy..

In our Biblical passage the saving grace of this story is that we have the beginnings of the redemption story as well. Even in the face of intense violence and crisis, God is working in this moment and people are listening to the benevolent voice of God as well. For Joseph, one of the few characters in the Nativity story who doesn't get much credit for anything is found to exemplify one of the greatest principles in all of Scripture – obedience. Joseph doesn't get much credit for anything in the

Nativity story. He is not Jesus' biological father, he does not seem to offer much care, and we assume he was not an active part of the birth story. But his silence is mere repetition of the idea that we are to listen and obey. That moving along with the story, for the sake of the story is enough. He accepts what Mary tells him, follows her lead, and is a bystander at their side. He is first visited by an angel that tells him not to leave Mary but to endure her pregnancy and to hope for the best for them both. Then he is visited again in a dream by an angel of the Lord that tells him to get up and Go! Go to Egypt! Travel again as far as he could imagine and remain there till it was time to return. Then after Herod dies, he is visited again for a third time and told to go Galilee. Where he will settle in Nazareth. Joseph, like any of us, is a person, a man with choices. He could choose to follow the voice of God or not. He could have chosen at any point to stop the madness of traveling with a pregnant woman and then with a young child long distances. But he did not, he heard and headed the call of God to go and follow. His obedience is crucial to our understanding of salvation. Through obedience comes safety, security, and hope. Joseph is a hero.

It feels strange to think of that right? Because he's such a secondary character and because really he only saved himself, Mary and Jesus. And yet, this act of obedience was enough, enough to change the course of human history and to impact how we understand faith and time. Joseph himself is a prophet because he listened. He chose to follow and obey. He chose to enable the priestly work of Jesus. So how do we listen? How are we obedient to God's call?

God still speaks. It may not be how we imagine it though. We often want to hear God speaking in a big loud voice from the heavens. Coming down to save us. To make it all go away. To give us relief from our sufferings. And I want that to be true. I want that for each of us to have a moment where we are compelled to follow Christ. Where it is so clear and undeniable – faith is easy in those moments. I wish an angel would come to all of us in our hour of need. We want to be like Hagar met by God in the wilderness and called by name. We want to be like Moses before the burning bush. To be like

Elijah calling on God against the false prophets of Baal and having fire rain down. Or to be like Paul, struck down by God to serve and become a missionary for the Lord, because Paul knew exactly who and what he served. But instead, we are like Elijah, caught up in the wind and waves, and God comes in a still small voice. The trumpet does not sound. The horsemen do not depart.

And there is silence. The silence often speaks louder than the wind. Years ago, Simon and Garfunkel sang about the sound of silence. The power of silence is that it is always there, always available, always waiting. It is here, in the silence that we are to look for the Lord. And it is hard when we are in darkness to see, to know that God is there, but it is in silence that we are found by God. Some profess a prosperity doctrine where if we enough, God will respond and reward us. But this as well is false. It is violence against the relationship that can be cultivated with God. For when we work so hard we do not invite Sabbath rest, we do not invite God to have a place at our table in our homes or in our lives. Our frantic lifestyle actually prevents relationship with Jesus because we forbid him not to come to our hearts. We put up boundaries and borders around ourselves and our tables, even around THE communion table. This only inhibits our relationship with God. If we are strong enough to slow down and listen, the light creeps in. We allow God to have a place at our table, we give space for God and do not bully God into following our will.

The other way that God shows up is through relationship with others. It is in recognizing that we are not meant to be alone in this world. Through cultivating relationship with others that we better see God in world and in the lives of others. St. Teresa of Avila once said,

“Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.” ~

So you might be wondering? I have not heard God. I do not recognize God's interventions in my life. How is this true? One of the things about pride, about solidarity with God is that it is subtle. It is

not cohesive or manipulative. It is accountable and personable. It is enacted through the small acts of kindness and generosity between others. In our expansive Western mindset, we focus too much on the powerful and the acquisition of things, power, and money. God is not about all of that. God has a heart for the poor and the desperate, for the isolated and for the weak. Our country is in a rocky spot right now. We are on the precipice of something major. And none of us are really sure what that is or what it will look like. But in our materialism, capitalism and individualism – we fail to listen. To understand the disparity between the classes of our country. We fail to see and listen to the suffering of our neighbors. And we fail to view our neighbors as people worthy of our recognition and the power of our beholding.

We are entering into the election cycle and I am not going to predict what will happen. But this I will say. We need to get over ourselves and begin to recognize our connection to one another. Politicians will not save us. Indeed, Christians were called out of our individual homes and security – to follow Jesus. And we are being led into a world of compassion because our neighbor is ourselves. The news media, as I mentioned earlier will paint life as doom and gloom. But there is opportunity to develop connection with one another. Opportunity to more. If we take a step away and listen to our own hearts and the heart of God. If we listen, listen with the heart of Joseph. Listening does not mean having the answers or being able to fix the situation. Married couples hopefully learn this early in their relationships. Sometimes the other person just wants a sounding board and not to be told how to fix a problem or an issue. Listening does not mean, not feeling scared or conflicted either. Joseph had to have been scared and questioning in his heart of what he was hearing or being called to do. He was decisively human after all. And yet, his fear did not define him. His ability to listen and to trust did. Joseph was not overcome by his fear but allowed it to have a place and be secondary to his faith.

When we listen to God we are not perfect. We are not demigods. We are human and we are participating in God's real intentional plan for us. We are to be a holy people, together and connected

even in the face of extreme violence. The future is uncertain and yet, it is held in God's hands. It is only through our faith and obedience to God's grace and mercy in our lives that we continue on. We listen with open hearts to know that it is not our will that will be done but God's will for our lives and our world's. Having faith and listening in a violent world means that we acknowledge God's pride in us and have faith and hope in our God to do amazing things in and through us. It means that we are there for those in need and do not place too much preciousness in ourselves, rather we begin to see ourselves as part of the larger story and as part of the redemption of this world. May we listen with eyes and hearts open to the love of Christ Jesus and may we follow where we are led. Amen.