

## "The Days After Christmas"

*Matthew 2:13-23*

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The waiting is over! Black Friday is a vague, distant memory, and all those days spent milling around malls and superstores to find the "right" gift for the lowest price are done. And those door-buster-deal gifts have been opened and received with joy (al-right!), disappointment (aw-man!), indifference (thanks.), or confusion (wow! what is it?).

It's only the day after Christmas, but already ornaments are being removed from formerly live Christmas trees, strands of lights becoming untangle-able masses. And the tree is being dragged through the house towards the curb, with its dry, prickly pine needles falling onto the floor, working their way into the carpet, never completely gone. Tinsel is tying up somebody's vacuum cleaner. And somewhere someone is quoting Shakespeare to a stubborn red wine stain on the carpet, "Out, Out damn spot!" (from *Macbeth*). Multi-colored lights on the outside of the house are simply unplugged until next year, as they were only worth putting up once.

Finally, after all the houseguests have left, there is a collective sigh of relief, even though shreds of wrapping paper, crumpled like aluminum foil, still litter the house. Staring at hastily unwrapped gifts, the thought comes to mind, "Something is missing."

It's not always easy to distinguish the popular Christmas rituals of hurrying, shopping, and partying from the *Christian* rituals of waiting, serving, and worshiping. Shopping lists are made while Advent candles are lit. Often all of our rituals are combined into *one* story and *one* mood that can only be expressed with a smile and the greeting, "Merry Christmas!" Even those who have never stepped foot in a church know the popular version of the Nativity that borrows details from the gospels of Matthew and Luke—that Jesus was born of the virgin Mary, that there were angels, shepherds and wise men in attendance, and that Jesus was born in a manger in Bethlehem because a star led them there, but there was no room at the inn. Vaguely keeping this sweet story in mind (even as we shop), Christmas becomes a mandatory day of gift giving and playing nice that is somehow our way of "paying homage" to the baby Jesus. Many never get past the manger scene.

It *is* a beautiful scene, and our children stage it beautifully in costume every year. But if we look at the nativity scene long and hard enough, we will have to admit that *something is missing*.

If you recall, last Sunday we had *this* beautiful, mystical telling of the birth of Jesus:

...Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, **do not be afraid** to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,  
and they shall name him Emmanuel',

which means, '**God is with us.**' When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus. (Matthew 1:18b-25)

But then the guests arrive...at the wrong house. The magi come to *Herod, king of the Jews*, and ask, "Where is the *child* who has been born *king of the Jews*? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." Herod is frightened by their news, but sends them to the right address, telling them with his deceptive, Grinchy smile, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that / may go and pay him homage." Oblivious, the magi go and "[o]n entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh." This is the place where many people stop, mentally adding the words, "and they lived happily every after," but instead the biblical story continues with, "and having been warned in a dream *not* to return to Herod, [the magi] left for their own country by another road." **Instead of a happy ending we get an ominous beginning.**

After the houseguests (the magi) have left, Joseph's dreams darken; his good news dreams turn into nightmarish warnings. "Get up! Run! Herod's trying to kill the child!" Now on the run, refugees in Egypt, Joseph must've been thinking to himself, *What happened to all that talk about "do not be afraid" and "God*

*with us”?! Is this a different angel of the Lord? If so, bring back the other one, the “nice” one with the soft voice. If God is with us, how can this happen?*

The following scenes have been omitted from mainstream Christmas media. “When Herod saw that he’d been tricked by [the magi...] he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under.” In these scenes the *Silent Night* lullaby is overcome by the cries of slaughtered innocents. You won't find any Christmas cards with this story; no cards with such poetry:

*A voice was heard in Ramah,  
wailing and loud lamentation,  
Rachel weeping for her children,  
because they are no more.*

Merry Christmas!

You won't hear Linus retell this part of the story in *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. Matthew's Christmas story is Rated NC-17—NO ONE 17 AND UNDER ADMITTED. Perry Como would faint! Matthew is the only gospel writer to extend the Christmas story beyond the manger scene. Were it not included the Common Lectionary we would probably skip over this story like so many others; yet even with the Lectionary we only read this part of the story every three years. So *why*, why tell this part of the story?!

Now we could talk about how Herod's cruelty mimics that of the Egyptian Pharaoh who ordered the slaughter of all newborn boys and how Jesus is a type of Moses, surviving the slaughter, or a type of Israel, exiled in Egypt. However, such knowledge alone does not fully address “the hopes and fears of [*this year—let alone*] all the years.” In the days after Christmas, when innocents *still* suffer, when nights are *still* filled with tears, and when fears *still* trouble our sleep, nothing but the God-with-us truth will do.

We need this story to be a part of the Christmas story because it gives “voice” to *our* suffering, sorrow and fears. We need this story because many people are more worried about having enough food than getting rid of leftovers; many people are more worried about having a home than decorating it. Norman Vincent Peale once wrote that “Christmas waves a magic wand over this world, and behold, everything is softer and more beautiful,” but many find it difficult to think so positively. For many people, the popular Christmas message is too good to be true, and doesn't begin to acknowledge our deepest hope—often fragile as a baby—that God is somehow with us, especially in the times when God seems most absent.

We strain to affirm the faith of the people of Israel, who “in all their distress,” claimed that “[i]t was no messenger or angel but [the LORD’s] presence that saved them” time and again (Is. 63:9). Like T.S. Eliot’s magi, in the hardest of times, we constantly have “voices singing in our ears, saying that this [is] all folly,” that this Jesus is not King of the Jews or Messiah or Savior or Son of God; and that God is *not* with us. Yet this story assures us that out of all the cruelty, death and darkness of those days there emerged *one*, and our faith was born. So it was at Jesus’ birth. So it was at his death and resurrection. And perhaps it will be so when he comes again.

There is the impression that the waiting of Advent is relieved by the lighting of the Christ candle on Christmas Eve, but we know that our waiting is not over. Christmas has come and gone, and yet there are still people sitting in darkness, waiting for the Light of Christ to shine upon them, waiting for a sign that God is *still* with us. And so, long after the ornaments and Advent candles are put away, let us be engaged in what Howard Thurman, called “The Work of Christmas”:

When the song of the angels is stilled,  
When the star in the sky is gone,  
When the kings and princes are home,  
When the shepherds are back with their flock,  
The work of Christmas begins:  
    To find the lost,  
    To heal the broken,  
    To feed the hungry  
    To release the prisoners,  
    To rebuild the nations,  
    To bring peace among people,  
    To make music in the heart.

So be it. Amen.