

Faith Mennonite Church  
December 26, 2010  
Joetta Schlabach

**An inhospitable welcome**  
*Hebrews 2:10-18; Matthew 2:13-23*

In the well-loved poem, “The night *before* Christmas,” the poet described the children’s Christmas dreams as “visions of sugarplums danc[ing] in their heads.” On the night *after* Christmas, in Matthew’s telling of the story, the night after the magi left, the dreams were not so sweet. Joseph, in fact, had a nightmare, the most fearful dream any parent can ever imagine: “Get up, run, take your wife and child and hide because the king is sending out his thugs to kill the little ones.”

In Matthew’s Christmas story, there’s no time for Mary to “ponder these things in her heart” (as she does in Luke’s story). There’s no time for a leisurely Christmas morning to play with the toys. There’s hardly time to put the gifts away and clean the kitchen after entertaining the magi. Certainly there’s no time for “a long winter’s nap.” Instead, Mary and Joseph have to grab the things they can easily carry. At least they have some gold for the trip.

The story catches up short. The juxtaposition between the magi and Herod—the truth of the human condition writ large—isn’t what we expect at Christmas time. Matthew doesn’t give us peace on earth and goodwill for the people like Luke does. Instead, as Thomas Troeger writes so eloquently, Matthew’s story “shows us [humans] to be capable of a passionate desire to search for, to find, to adore, to lavish our gifts upon the gift of God [as the magi did], while with equal realism it portrays the massive weight of our intransigence to grace, not only in the human heart, but also in our systems of military and political power that repress our highest and holiest yearnings with brutal violence.”<sup>1</sup>

Although we don’t know whether the slaughter of the innocents that Matthew recounts was an actual historical event, history records enough about Herod the Great that it’s certainly within the realm of possibility. Herod was not a Jew, but an Idumean appointed by the Romans. Biblical scholars tell us that “[h]e had to fight for several years to take control of his kingdom, so he never felt secure. He maintained a private security force and built fortresses at Jerusalem, Sebaste, Caesarea, Machaerus, the Herodium, Masada, and elsewhere so he would never be far from a defensible refuge. He killed descendants of the Hasmoneans so he would have no rival. When he suspected intrigue in his own family, he killed his wife Mariamne and one of his sons. Before he died he commanded that at his death political prisoners should be killed so that there would be mourning throughout the land.”<sup>2</sup>

This is the political setting into which Jesus was born. It was comparable to Idi Amin’s Uganda, Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, Papa Doc’s Haiti, Robert Mugabe’s Zimbabwe. The amazing story of the incarnation that we celebrate at Christmas is not simply that God came to us and took human form. Even more amazing is the fact that God became vulnerable to the forces for good and for evil that surround the human condition. Jesus’ life was threatened from the moment of his birth.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Troeger, “Homiletical Perspective on Matthew 2:13-23” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 1*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> R. Alan Culpepper, “Exegetical Perspective on Matthew 2:13-23,” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 1*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

But Matthew’s readers, a predominantly Jewish audience, would catch a glimmer of hope as soon as the family fled to Egypt. For Egypt was the place of grave suffering in the history of their people, but it was also the place where the powerful, liberating hand of God brought deliverance. It was from Egypt that God began to shape a people and lead them toward a promised land.

The Israelite’s 40-year journey through the desert, between Egypt and Canaan (the promised land), was a path of suffering, of disillusionment, and at times rebellion. The new journey of deliverance, led by Jesus, which we are still on, would follow a similar pattern. The writer of Hebrews, in the passage Michelle read for us, referred to Jesus’ life as an experience of being made “perfect through suffering.” One commentator has written that “God’s concern is not to make pampered children by attending to our every whim. God is infinitely more concerned with our holiness than with our happiness, and with giving us help at the point of pain than with delivering us from the pain....It is in this suffering that we best experience God’s relationship with humankind.”<sup>3</sup>

“It is in this suffering that we best experience God’s relationship with humankind.” Can this really be? We don’t find many Christmas carols wrapping their tunes around that concept! Holiday shopping displays may have enticed us into thinking that we didn’t have enough, but they certainly didn’t want to raise the specter of suffering. It’s all about comfort and joy!

Indeed we desire comfort and joy. That is why we read the texts from the Old Testament book of Isaiah during Advent, with their vision of peace and comfort after Israel’s long periods of exile and suffering. That is why Matthew told the story of the magi, showing the best of human potential to seek wisdom and honor hope. That is why Joseph fled and did everything possible to protect the young life he and Mary had been entrusted with. But our desire for comfort and joy must never isolate us from the very vulnerability and uncertainty into which Jesus was born, and that ultimately claimed his life. Clearly Mary and Joseph balanced the need to protect the child Jesus with raising him with an awareness of his surroundings and instilling in him a growing passion for justice. We will have a wonderful opportunity to journey with Mary and Joseph as we help welcome a refugee family in the coming weeks.

Mary and Joseph did not question the presence of God, even in their exile, and neither should we allow situations of overwhelming injustice and misery to plant doubts within us about the whereabouts of God. The message of Christmas, is that there is NO place so inhospitable that God is not present. In fact, Christmas teaches that it is precisely over the *darkest* of dark places that God’s Spirit hovers. Emmanuel, God is with us. Let us share this good news!

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### Response by Marybeth Luig

I keep a small journal with me in worship meetings, with notes from personal readings or a story told with a point I wish to hold for reflection. I keep this handy to prompt my contemplations; to create a listening point where God can touch my spirit and I can know that touch readily.

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<sup>3</sup> William L. Self “Homiletical Perspective on Hebrews 2:10-18” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 1*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

One entry I encounter often is taken from Scott M. Peck's book, "Different Drum". He observes, "We are all wounded.", and then raises the question, "Why do we pretend we are not?"

In today's readings and reflections, we hear of the grievous wounds visited on the subjects of King Herod; of the perils faced by parents and infants under his rule in those days. It is wrenching to think about. I want to look away from that part of the story, or get past it quickly, at least. Being in peril and being wounded is, well, painfully familiar.

In April, this past spring, I received an unexpected lease termination when the rental/house-sit I was living in, in Northfield, was to be listed on the market, reversing what had been the owner's stated intention to hold onto the property long-term. As I opened the certified mail notifying me my lease would not be renewed, and sensing I was likely to face long-term unemployment in this economic climate, it was clear to me immediately that I was in great peril, with no resource to secure another lease, especially not an affordable lease in a healing environment, as this had been.

I was very much in need of a place of stability, and I believed I had found it. But it was not to be this place and I had to bring myself to accept another move. I've moved nearly every year, for the past 15 years. Finding the emotional courage to survive the disruption again was, by far, the greater challenge for me, though the practical and financial challenges were daunting, to be sure.

As I made my choices, I listened to God's voice guiding me to return to the Twin Cities, where I had lived 20 years ago. I had left the Cities very happily and strongly pushed back all earlier promptings to relocate to the Cities. I had no desire to live here, but knew there *were* important reasons to be here.

So I moved, upset (angry? Yes...) at God and life, for 'making me move again, and this time I *had* to move back to the Cities'... The anger was really a terrible sadness, I needed to process, because the wounds were pretty deep and raw and painful. As I've done many times in my life, I reached out to my faith communities for comfort, advice and nurture and to actually help with packing and moving.

All did not proceed smoothly. I did not find housing immediately and spent many days and weeks face to face with the reality of being at risk of having no place to go when my lease ended. There was pressure to vacate before the lease was ended, for other's convenience, but not in my best interest. I had to hold up my rights *and* make decisions in consideration of preventing bridges burning.

I found a sublet for the summer and moved. As the culture of the city wrapped around me, I was at times so lost and frustrated with the pace of life, the noise and traffic in the Cities I would be in tears trying to get from Prospect Park to Cedar-Riverside! I didn't want to be here and I didn't want to learn a new survival strategy and I didn't want to spend so much time packing and unpacking that my job search and professional networking would be damaged. But I could not prevent those wounds from falling on me.

Yet, I knew in the depth of my soul, this was the place I was being brought to and the right time. Other doors remained shut and doors opened here. That pattern is unmistakable, even if one doesn't want to admit it right away....

Seeing "way open" and finding the courage to go there is one way I experience God's presence in a time of difficulty. Finding a nurturing, caring community – which is this community and my Quaker Meeting, is another way I draw God's presence near to me in time of peril. Yet another way of centering in God's care, for me, was to find good professional help in

the areas where I needed that level of support. I worked carefully to set limits that protected me. I prioritized taking care of myself, as an act of bringing God into the center of my life to walk through that time with me.

Other ways I have known the presence of God in times of peril are when the gift of a profound, intuitive or ‘ah-ha! Moment arrives, almost like a dove landing lightly on the window pane of my mind, with a message to deliver. I experience this often and give praise and thanks for the gift.

Another experience relates a different kind of healing from a great loss. I had performed and taught music for nearly 20 years, and deeply loved being around music and making music, when a series of ‘tidal waves’ of life-changing events overtook me and I entered a period of being tossed about. For years, I lived in survival mode on many levels. During that time, I could not play any music, did not touch my flute. After nearly 10 years away and thinking, for most of that time, I may never go back to playing flute music, I had quit looking at my loss and tried to live beyond the grief in peace. I did not sell the flutes or the music collection, though, as a wisdom—a hope—God’s voice, call it what you may, kept holding me back from that step.

One Tuesday morning, without effort or warning or pleading or pushing, the door opened in my spirit and I felt ‘OK’ about playing flute again. As I awoke that day, I just knew I could play again. To my surprise, much of my training and skill had held together during the years away... some aspects of musicianship had deepened and improved.

I am certain God is in the midst of my healing process. And I trust that of God will come forth. Whether I understand it now or never, or perhaps eventually is not as important as listening spiritually and trusting God’s presence will bring love and healing to me in many ways.

Decrees create wounds. Typically, we can’t reverse a decree and so we must live beyond the peril, going through survival to thrive again. My spirit is stronger for having been in peril. My faith community network is deeper. I am becoming familiar and comfortable with the healing process, learning to take care of myself as a priority, when in peril.

‘Yes’, I am wounded and, with the presence of God brought close to me, in whatever ways are right for each of me, ‘Absolutely’, I will heal; I am healing now.

God is among us.