

Faith Mennonite Church  
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O, the mystery of God's presence...in our distress!  
Joetta Schlabach

### **Matthew, Joseph, and Isaiah: Models of hope in distress**

*Isaiah 63:7-9; Matthew 2:13-23*

In the most recent edition of *The Mennonite* magazine, which arrived this week, columnist Peter Epp, a millennial who teaches Mennonite studies at the Mennonite Collegiate Institute in Gretna, Manitoba, listed a set of faith questions he hears from the high school students he teaches. Among those questions was: "Why should we trust that something as confusing as the Bible is 'God's Word'?" (If you'd like to know what the other questions are, there are copies of the issue on the literature rack in the narthex.)

Whether or not we are a millennial, I'm guessing this question has crossed each of our minds more than once! Whether you read the Bible casually, or devotionally, or study in a more deliberate way as some of us are privileged to do as part of our profession, we all come across passages that leave us perplexed and wondering, "why is this here?" or "what does this mean?" "'s this God's voice or what someone *thought* was God's voice?"

But the fact that the Bible isn't monolithic, doesn't speak with a single voice, doesn't paint an idyllic picture of the world or provide a conflict-free, happily-ever-after narrative, and doesn't portray a singular image of God, is one of the reasons I find it compelling. Our modern knowledge of the complexity of the cosmos should leave us suspicious of anything that would make God seem too simple, without any aspect of ambiguity or mystery.

The infancy narrative, the story of Jesus' birth, in the Gospel of Matthew contains a good deal of this mystery. Matthew, we may recall, was writing for a Jewish audience and frequently portrays events in the life of Jesus as fulfillment of prophesy in the Hebrew Scriptures. Our reading this morning contains three such references (vv. 15, 17-18, 23). Nevertheless, although Matthew saw fulfillment of scripture, he did not try to cover up or write out the world of conflict into which Jesus was born nor the direct effect this had upon Jesus' family. Our reading last Sunday found Joseph faced with the specter of a pregnant fiancé whom he considered quietly leaving, but a dream kept him in the game. In today's reading we have a maniacal monarch, threatened by the prospect of a challenge to his dynasty, wreaking havoc on a rural town, sending baby Jesus and his parents to flee as refugees to another country. And then when another dream indicates that it's safe to return, Joseph finds that it's not completely safe and moves the family even deeper into the countryside so they won't draw attention to themselves.

Whoa! What kind of story is this? What kind of a God—the one we believe is behind this whole amazing universe in which we live—would enter our human story in such a precarious, vulnerable way?

Last week we had a baby shower for our friend Hsar Hel. She and her family, like each of us who have welcomed children or nieces or nephews or godchildren, have such an overwhelming desire to protect and make sure these babies have all they need to be comfortable and safe. But we know that doesn't always happen. We know that Hsar Hel's older children, Lah Ku Shee and Eh Ku Paw were born in a refugee camp in Thailand. And this Christmas we know there were babies who didn't survive the typhoon in the Philippines this fall ... and there are babies in the midst of the struggles in Syria, and South Sudan, and the Central African Republic. And our hearts ache.

And if our hearts ache, how much more must the heart of God, parent of *all* people, ache. And so it's not so surprising after all that this God of intense love and compassion, come to earth in Jesus, chose not to be born in the comfort and security of luxury, but entered a vortex of oppression and pain. And his death—premature by our accounting—just 30-some years later, should also not surprise for as he grew he continued to enter ever more deeply into a suffering world. He didn't do this to authenticate or affirm the suffering, but to bring hope, to bring God's loving presence into the most bleak situations.

When Matthew's audience heard the story of Joseph taking Mary and the baby Jesus to Egypt they no doubt recalled their ancestor Joseph, another dreamer, who ended up in Egypt under duress, sold

by his brothers as a slave. In time, Egypt became a haven of safety for Joseph and his family, including the brothers who had disowned him. Years later this safety reverted to distress as their descendants, the Hebrew people, became slave laborers.

God's action in freeing the people from Egypt, from their distress, became the central story in the history of the Jewish people. It was that story that the prophet Hosea was recalling when he wrote "Out of Egypt I have called my son." Matthew would claim this quote to portray Jesus as a new Moses, one sent to liberate the people living in a new time of captivity.

Matthew, Joseph, and Isaiah, all find hope in the midst of distress. And where does that hope lie? Is it first of all in a vision of a new future? Isaiah certainly was inspired with future visions, many of which we turn to during the season of Advent. But the passage we read this morning from Isaiah 63 places hope somewhere else: in the past.

I will recount the gracious deeds of The Lord,  
the praiseworthy acts of The Lord,  
because of all that The Lord *has done* for us...  
all that he *has shown*.

The final portion of the book of Isaiah was written after the exiled community had returned to Jerusalem. The glorious visions they had had of that return didn't materialize quickly or in their entirety. Rebuilding after a disaster, especially a political one, is difficult work. It's not just a matter of putting bricks and mortar back in place. Old grievances, betrayals, divisions, trauma—these are the pieces of rebuilding that take years of care and understanding and grace and forgiveness.

Each of us have a role in the work of building hope—both the brick and mortar kind and the healing and grace kind. Some of us will be doing the physical building of hope in Duluth and Cloquet in the next two months as we work with Mennonite Disaster Service to rebuild homes destroyed by flooding two years ago. Others will be teaching and participating in the Restorative Justice and Strategies for Trauma Awareness and Resilience trainings that Donna Minter, Michelle Braley, and others are leading in the coming year to rebuild the emotional pieces. But, by far, most of the hope-building work we do is done through the quiet, everyday interactions in the classroom, the clinic, the counseling office, driving someone across town, over lunch with colleagues, across the fence with neighbors, around the dining table with our families.

In all of these settings the hope springs forth as we recall the past, and most importantly, as we remember how God brought us through in earlier days. For it is God's presence, God's grace, that heals, transforms, and builds hope. While the Jewish people liked to recall the powerful arm of God working on their behalf in the grand exodus from Egypt, Isaiah reminds us that hope springs too from the quiet presence of God:

It was no messenger or angel  
but God's presence that saved them;  
in love and in compassion God redeemed them;  
God lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.

As we enter a new year, we're tempted to place our hope in the resolutions we make for positive change in the future. In the two remaining days of 2013, I encourage you to return to the past and reflect on the ways that God lifted and carried you this year—in times of joy and in times of distress. May this recollection of God's enduring presence be the base for your hope for the coming year.