

## The World We Dream

Jan Wiersma

Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

Second Sunday of Christmas - January 1, 2023

Texts: Psalm 148, Matthew 2:13-23

### RESPONSIVE READING Psalm 148

Praise God! Praise the Beloved from the heavens; praise God in the heights!

**Praise God, all angels and all the heavenly host!**

Sun and moon; and all you shining stars, praise God's Name!

**Praise the Eternal, you highest heavens, and you waters above the heavens!**

Praise the One who commanded and you were created.

**The One who established you forever, who fixed your boundaries eternally.**

Praise your Creator from the earth, you sea monsters and all deeps,

**fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling God's command!**

Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars!

**Wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds!**

Leaders of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers!

**Young men and women alike, old and young together!**

Let them praise the name of the Beloved,

**whose name alone is exalted; whose glory is above earth and heaven.**

### GOSPEL READING Matthew 2: 13-2

*Today, a new day in a new year, we taste the sorrow that accompanied the glory, and see Jesus not as infant king but as refugee, fleeing for his life with his family. We see the carnage they fled, and hear the wailing of those who did not escape. What good news does this story have for us today?*

Now after the wise ones left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.' Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.'

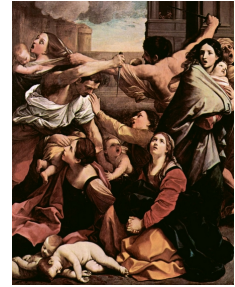
When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise ones, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

'A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation,

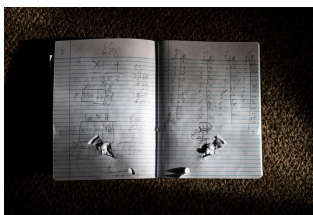
Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.'

When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead.' Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, 'He will be called a Nazorean.'

Somehow, this story never makes it into our Sunday School Christmas pageants. So few Christmas carols mention it. Oh, we see plenty of Christmas cards with Mary, Joseph, and the Baby heading off to Egypt. But when's the last time you got a card depicting the massacre of the baby boys of Bethlehem? Right. Then again, when did you last have a dream like Joseph's, instructing you on what to do and where to go next, to avoid catastrophe? Wouldn't you love to have clear directions for your life delivered by an angel while you slept, like a Google calendar alert programmed by God?



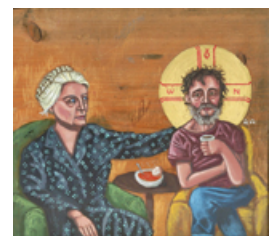
It's no surprise we don't hear this part of the Christmas story very often. It's hard to look at tragedy. But think for a minute. Think about the Holy Family as refugees, escaping just ahead of the violence in Bethlehem. Think about mothers wailing as their babies are torn from their arms. It's enough to give you nightmares. I want happier dreams. Christmas is about cozy family gatherings, especially now that the worst of covid is over. The New Year is about optimistic resolutions for self-improvement. For just these few days, we want to avert our eyes and



accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative. But these things and worse are happening right now. We know it. Massacre, genocide, ethnic cleansing, gun violence, domestic violence. In Yemen, where US aid supports an endless war, a child dies of hunger every 75 seconds.<sup>1</sup> Thinking about it, checking my facts on the internet, looking at the proof in pictures, I was growing downright despondent. The photo that hit me hardest was the bullet-torn math book of a 10-year-old child who died in the school shooting in Uvalde.

What puzzled me about the readings for today, though, is why this story of the slaughter of the innocents is paired with such a joyful psalm, where all creation praises God's power and glory. Even weather events and wild animals sing of God's goodness. How can we believe and sing along in a world with such sorrow? Such cruelty? Can this be God's truth for us today? Which do you choose, the nightmare? Or the daydream of an unreal world?

And then God told me, not in a dream: "Jan, you *must* believe it if you want anything to change. You *must not* close your eyes and stop your ears to suffering. You cannot give in to apathy, cynicism or despair. You *can* look to God for strength and purpose and righteousness. Open your heart to love for God's children, but open it first to God's power to bring life out of death." Because Jesus, Joseph and Mary *did* escape, and the words of the prophets *were* fulfilled, and Jesus *did* go on to live a life of love and mercy and healing. He lived a life of self-giving and self-sacrifice, specifically for the little, the lost, and the helpless ones of earth. We call God Father - or Mother, or parent - doesn't that



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<sup>1</sup> "By late 2022, around 2.2 million children under 5 years of age were experiencing wasting, including more than 500,000 children suffering from severe wasting." <https://www.unicef.org/emergencies/yemen-crisis#>

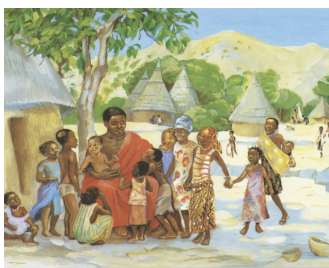
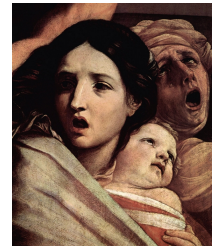
tell us that when Jesus the Son willingly gave up his innocent life, God knew in God's own self the depths of grief? (Image: Dorothy Day and the Homeless Christ.)

Such vital expressions of Christian faith arise from people who have known grief themselves, who are persecuted and oppressed. Such resilient lives, such fervent and authentic worship and praise, have come from the souls of enslaved people. From brown-skinned people emerged theologies of liberation. These were not seminary trained, Vatican-approved Bible scholars, but poor people talking to other poor people, fully aware of why all decks were stacked against them—all but one, which was the power of God with them, a power that triumphed even over death. And they have taught the rest of us that yes, God loves everyone—but God maintains a preferential option for the poor. What does that mean?



Check your Bible. How often does Jesus say, “The last will be first and the first will be last; The hungry will be filled and the rich sent away empty; The powerful will be toppled and the humble exalted”? How often do the Old Testament prophets warn the people that unless they care for the widow and the orphan, the vulnerable, the alien and the stranger, they are in for some bitter surprises? If we cut out all those verses, our Bibles would literally be full of holes.

My friend Melece, a mother and a writer, imagines the story of the Holy Innocents from the point of view of a bereaved mother of Bethlehem, one whose son did not escape. In her grief, and because King Herod's court is so far outside her experience, she blames neither the king nor the soldiers with their swords, but the baby on whose account *her* baby died. The one who got the star, and the angels, and the kings that drew Herod's notice and fury. The one who got away safe. A cloud of bitterness hangs over her until, as an old woman, she hears the words of a traveling preacher saying:



“Let the little children come to me, for to such as these is the kingdom of heaven....Blessed are you who are bowed down in spirit; yours is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you who mourn; you will be comforted. Blessed are you merciful; you will receive mercy.” As she listens, her spirit warms to the love that flows from him, and she sees in Jesus the one in whom all will be made well again, and every wounded heart made whole. She and her son will be together again in the reality of God's kingdom.

Nothing is lost that will not be found; no wrong is done that will not be set right; no life is overlooked that will not someday be seen as precious. Through the child born for us, it will be accomplished. Through ordinary people like you and me, God will do extraordinary things. Look carefully at



the picture of the ruined Ukrainian church. At the center, one small thing survives intact: a picture of the mother and child.



We, Christians of the 21st century, cannot erase the nightmares of the past, but we can dream a world in which God's good will is done. We can dream a dream more real than the nightmare that says war is inevitable, that some people exist only to enrich others, and that we privileged ones are somehow entitled to what we have. God's dream in us is a dream of a better, safer, more glorious world, where all people and all things lift their voices in praise. And we can help make it so, by the power of God, who dreams and lives and acts in us. That is the good news for this New Year. May it be so. Amen.

PRAYERS Author of our lives, at the dawning of this new year, dream in us your dream of peace and plenty, your dream of well-being for all people. Give us grace and confidence to share your dream with the children in our lives, single parents, lonely young adults, unhoused neighbors, those who grieve, those who despair, those who hope against hope that this year will be better. Let us share it not just with our words, but with our own life stories as they unfold. We hold in our hearts those we love most dearly, whose sufferings we feel but cannot heal; you can. Kindle in us a flame of love for all: for our foes as well as friends, and family; from the lowliest to the name that is highest of all. In that name we pray, AMEN

#### IMAGE CREDITS

Reni, Guido, 1575-1642. Slaughter of the Innocents, from **Art in the Christian Tradition**, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN.

<https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=46513> [retrieved December 31, 2022].

Tamir Kalifa, New York Times, Ten days after the Buffalo shooting, 19 children and two teachers were shot to death at an elementary school in Uvalde, Texas. A bullet ripped through a fourth-grade math notebook belonging to one of the victims, 10-year-old Uziyah Garcia.

Latimore, Kelly. Dorothy Day with Homeless Christ, from **Art in the Christian Tradition**, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN.

<https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=57122>

Latimore, Kelly. The Flight to Egypt. "The other may have something to teach us about what we know, about who God is, the world we live in and who are our neighbors. This is the real work of being human and of art. Being more present."

JESUS MAFA. The Sermon on the Mount, from **Art in the Christian Tradition**.

Berehulak, Daniel, New York Times. Mykolaiv Region, Ukraine, Aug. 11. The debris of a church after a Russian attack.

And with gratitude to Meleece Cheal Orme for her always illuminating insights into well-known, and lesser-known, stories.