

‘WHAT’S NEW?’

Matthew 2: 13-23

First of all, a word of appreciation to serve you for the first quarter of 2023. I find myself being called a “gap” pastor. That is, able to serve a congregation for a brief period of time while they search for a pastor or while they await the arrival of their new pastor. It is a fulfilling ministry and enables me to continue relationship with folks I had established as General Presbyter and Stated Clerk. So, my thanks for our time together.

Hard to believe we begin a new year on this day. Just a week ago, we

celebrated the birth of Christ and today we celebrate the incoming new secular calendar.

Yet, what I find even more surprising is the scripture passage for today: Matthew 2: 13-23. It really is quite a drastic contrast to the scripture we read just a week ago.

A week ago was the joyous birth of Jesus Christ. As Luke records, Joseph and Mary were in Bethlehem and the time came for her to deliver the child.

Today, we read that the angel said to Joseph, get up, take the child and his mother and flee to Egypt.

Last week, there was exaltation and good news by the angels, “Be not afraid -
- I am bringing good news of great joy for all the people.

This week, Herod tricked by the Wisemen was infuriated and he had all children two years old and under around Bethlehem killed.

Last week the angel with the multitude of the heavenly host were praising God, declaring Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace.

This week, a voice was heard in Ramah wailing with loud lamentation. Rachel was weeping over her children;

she was not consoled for there were no more children.

Just seven days ago, the Shepherds declared to others about this new child and all who heard it were amazed at the news.

Today, Joseph going to Judea where Herod’s son was ruler was frightened to go there. So, he changed course and went to Nazareth.

What gives?

Joy Anguish

Celebration Fear

Exaltation Anxiety

Savior of the World God’s son

on the run

New born birth Death to new
borns.

Initially when I read this passage I thought is this a trick? Is this a joke? Is this a scam?

And then I realized how appropriate for the Matthew 2 story to come right after the birth story of Jesus. How appropriate for us to hold both stories in tension with each other. How real it is to have the good news of Christ colliding with revenge, death, and dying. After all is this not the reason Jesus was born? Is not the story this week the reason we celebrate Christmas in the first place? The good news is that we can read the

Matthew 2 story in light of the birth of

Christ and declare who is the victor!

Declare where victory really is. Declare the birth of Christ is our hope to deal with the evil in the world. So, we can join the angels last week singing, “Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace among all people!”

A concern I have in many mainline congregations is that our Christianity is a private experience for folks. It is about me and my relationship with God. It is about what I can get out of my faith. It really is about what makes me comfortable. So, that we can celebrate the events like Christmas and Easter and

feel good about God and our understanding of God.

Yet, this passage from Matthew is a real dose of reality dropped right in the middle of our Christmas celebration. It reminds me that the Christian faith is always in tension with the real world. The Christian faith is always combatting the reality of sin and evil in the world. Our faith always stands over against what we read in the paper or hear on the news. And if our faith does not speak to the news and events of the world, then of what value is our faith? If it does not enable us to see beyond the sad news we hear every day, what good is it?

In the Presbyterian Church, one of our Historical Principles is known as Truth and Good news. It is foundational for us. The Principle declare that truth is in order to goodness.

Quoting, “No opinion can either be more pernicious or absurd than that which brings truth and falsehood upon a level, and represent it as of no consequence what someone’s opinions are.”

There are consequences to what we believe or our beliefs are just a joke. There is an inseparable connection between faith and practice, between truth and duty. Otherwise, it would be of no

consequence either to discover the truth or embrace it. (F-30104)

In other words, as Jesus declared, “By their fruits you shall know them.” Are we just going to talk the talk or are we going to walk the walk? And if you are willing to walk the walk, you will have people turning from you. If you are going to seek the truth, people will deny you. If you are going to practice what you preach, there will be some very lonely times.

Speaking of truth...there is a scarcity of the value in our society. Often, we associate it with politicians who tell half-truths. Yet, recently, one politician who

got elected told the whole lie. The congressman from New York, Mr. George Santos lied about a number of things on his resume, in his campaign, and about his family. Yet, other leaders in that party have said nothing. It seems if you say something enough times, people believe it is the truth.

The Principle of Truth and Goodness is the very foundational belief of Presbyterians that often gets us into trouble. And what I mean is that our church is seeking the truth and allowing the truth to guide our practices and lives. So, what would we do about a person who

is our representative that has the record of Mr. Santos?

We declare that the “truth will set you free.” Yet many people will question us and say things about us that are not very becoming if we try to live out our faith. Would we dare question someone who has obviously misled people and did not tell the truth like Mr. Santos?

I believe the story in Matthew is a power story about sin and evil. Herod was paranoid. He was afraid he was losing his power and position. He was going to have competition he thought. And so, he thought he would eliminate any competition by killing all boys 2

years and younger around Bethlehem.

And yet, we see that God won that battle. God was and is triumphant.

Many of us ponder the question of Theodicy. That is, we wonder does God cause evil to happen? Does God cause evil to fall on people? Did God set up Jesus in this story to test him and his parents?

It seems to me that God allows evil in this world, but does not cause evil. If God is all loving and caring, why would God send evil into the world? If love conquers evil would God not be in competition with himself? Is not causing evil the direct opposite of the God we

worship? Yet God - - because of free will
- - allows evil to occur in the world.

And yet, every time God prevails.
God works through what the situation is
and is victorious over the enemy. It
happened on Good Friday. God allowed
his son - - Savior of the world - - to die.
Evil on that day was real. Evil appeared
to prevail. Yet, three days later the last
enemy - - death itself - - as conquered
when Christ was resurrected. Death and
evil were soundly defeated and God was
victorious.

Now the question comes, “Do you
believe this?” Do you believe that what
we believe has a direct impact on how we

live? Do you believe you need to quit just
talking the talk and start walking the
walk? Has your faith become so
comfortable that is really just keeps you at
peace with yourself? Are you turning
your head away from the evil in our world
today? Are you in denial that it occurs?
Are you willing to allow false statements
to become the norm and refuse to raise
objections?

And as a congregation, are we so
comfortable and set in our ways, we don't
want to “rock the boat”? What about all
the sad things that happen in this town
that we could provide ministry to?

Are there young adults who are living a carefree life and being irresponsible financially?

Are there addicts that need our care and challenge?

Are race relationships in need of care and support?

What about hunger in our community?

Not to mention folks in jail as well as their families?

Are the civic leaders in this town providing leadership or is there corruption that needs to be spotlighted?

What about the school system and giving children a good and positive future?

One of the great things about being a “gap” pastor is that I am on a short leash. Session can terminate me anytime. And that gives me freedom to proclaim the Gospel. And it gives you the freedom to come back and challenge me.

It is an opportunity to deal with scriptures to see what they are declaring for both of us. So, we can have a good time probing and challenging one another seeking God’s will and purpose for our lives and our congregation.

I invite you to go with me on this journey to see what God might be doing among us.

My sermon title is “What’s New?” Probably nothing much to many of us as we all have been around the barn a lot of times.

But my suggestion is that What’s New? is the opportunity to hold the birth of Christ and the slaughter of the innocents (the boys 2 years of age and younger) in tension with each other.

So that our glorious Christmas story has a say about the horrible story of the killing of innocent children. So, that we might look in a new way of how our faith

impacts our lives as well as the world around us.

That’s new and very appropriate for a new calendar year. Hold these two stories today in tension with each other and have a Happy New Year!