

The Very Next Day

Matthew 2:13-23

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One of my best friends from high school has a six-month-old son. He was born with severe heart defects: his pulmonary arteries didn't really form when he was in the womb, so he has very small and fragile connections between his heart and lungs. He has already had several surgeries, but at this point the doctors have told his parents – my friend and her husband – that there's nothing else they can do unless the arteries grow and strengthen on their own. It seems you can't just create arteries where there are none, and without them, this tiny boy's heart and lungs will not be able to keep his body going. Every day is a gift for this family, but it's also terrifying, as they wonder how long they will have their precious son with them and under what conditions.

We hear stories like this often: babies born premature or in terrible conditions, with physical issues that have nothing to do with them, or with a lack of support and love to sustain them. But even the little ones we label as "normal" are fragile. They stand at risk to environmental poisons, the slow death of the natural world, the erosion of consumerism, the horrors of various kinds of exploitation, the perils of war, hunger and poverty. One of my professors used to say that bringing a child into the world – *this* world – is one of the greatest acts of faith we can perform, as it is always a scary venture, and must be entered into with a great deal of fear and trepidation, respect and faith. It's a wild experience, to be sure – from the first days of worrying whether or not the carseat is installed properly to months and even years of checking just one more time to make sure the little one is still breathing in the crib to phone calls and late nights of anxiety until the teenager comes home, and on and on.

It turns out that even the parents of God himself were not immune to this anxiety. Here we are, having not yet even put away all of our Christmas toys, still basking in the glow of the holiday and aching from the late nights putting toys together or a simple overindulgence in the chocolates someone so generously placed in our stockings. We're still humming "silent night" – after all, it's just the day after Christmas – and it seems unfair that our gospel text is so yucky. I know why so many churches are doing carol sings today – because who wants to dwell on this story from Matthew? Baby Jesus was just born. His parents are probably exhausted – as all new parents are, even if they're related – and they're trying to figure out what the heck they're supposed to do with this tiny kid. It's bad enough to have a newborn, but to know he's actually the Son of God and the savior of the world? It kind of ups the ante a little, don't you think? I can't imagine being Jesus' mom and dad didn't produce a wee bit of anxiety for Mary and Joseph.

Add to the whole newborn-Messiah thing that the most powerful ruler of the time was threatened by this fragile little guy and trying to kill him, and it's a parent's worst nightmare – literally. Joseph had a dream, and an angel came. Now if I were Joseph, I might be pretty sick of those angels by now – while their news has generally been good thus far, it hasn't exactly been easy. But here's another one, telling Joseph to take his tired, nervous, newborn family immediately to Egypt and stay there indefinitely as refugees, because Herod is out to kill the king of the Jews.

He's a horrible man, this Herod – we already knew that – but he confirms it for us when he has all the children around Bethlehem killed to try to get Jesus. There is weeping and loud lamentation throughout the land. It's not a 'silent night' anymore. And even after Herod's death, the holy family is in danger, as his son, Archelaus, is no better. So Jesus grows up somewhere else, somewhere his parents hope he will be safe, somewhere foreign. Jesus grows up a refugee.

The great Old Testament theologian Walter Brueggemann has said, "Had we the chance, we would have rushed to Bethlehem to see this thing that had come to pass. Had we been a day later, we would have found the manger empty."¹ Because the holy family had to take off to Egypt.

And Brueggemann helps us ask the question: "Why is Herod – why is the establishment – so threatened by this tiny child?" I mean, have you ever seen a brand new baby? Held one in your arms? How threatening could Jesus be – wrapped in his swaddling clothes and lying in a manger, surrounded by stable animals because his parents got to Bethlehem after the census crowds had taken up all the hotel rooms?

But perhaps it's Herod who knows better than anyone else in Jesus' early life just how powerful he will be. Perhaps it's Herod who knows that Jesus is not *only* the true King of the Jews, but also the Savior of the world. Perhaps Herod understands that Jesus' life will threaten the way things are, will turn the world upside-down, as he asserts that the last shall be first and the first shall be last; that the meek will inherit the earth and the kingdom of heaven will go to the poor in spirit. Herod understands that the grace Jesus will teach and preach and live will not work with his own system of violence and coercion. He understands that Jesus' truth will challenge his lies; that Jesus' power will be greater than any power the world has ever known, as he can heal the sick and cure the lame and even raise the dead. Perhaps Herod knows that Jesus has the power to forgive sins and cancel debt and turn our guilt to gratitude.

And Herod isn't interested in becoming a disciple – he isn't interested in walking into the future empty-handed, ready to receive the gifts of God each day. He wants power and authority and control in his grasp, so he seeks to get rid of this baby in the manger. And he is the first of many who will pursue Jesus throughout his life, until finally, one Friday, those who are unwilling to live in this upside-down world will take his life. But not until he has lived: the angel of God and Mary and Joseph make sure of that.

So the holy family goes to Egypt, because living in the discomfort of an unfamiliar land was at least living. And Joseph had the Son of God to protect, after all. Jesus spent his early days there, only to come out of Egypt, like the great leader Moses before him, to later bring *all* people out of captivity and into the light of life.

And what do *we* do with all of this, the very next day? Does it mean we put away our decorations and stop singing our songs and stifle the joy we experienced on Christmas morning, saving it until next year? I don't think so. In fact, I think this story calls us to do the opposite: to sing more loudly of Christmas, to continue with the shepherds into the world to share the joy that's come to all people, to keep celebrating the love, hope, peace, and joy that Christ brings into our lives. Because Christmas isn't just about that one day when we exchange gifts or that

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Prayers for a Privileged People* (Nashville, Abingdon: 2008), 73. This sermon's title is also borrowed from Brueggemann's prayer.

one day when Christ was born in Bethlehem: it's about God coming to earth, living in a certain way to show us how to live, and conquering death a few decades later. It's about God's power to turn things upside-down, to usher in a kingdom where new families will no longer be at risk, and the powerful will no longer seek to overthrow those who speak truth and bring peace and healing to the world. It's about the assertion that nothing can defeat God's promise of Emmanuel – God with us – not even the most formidable king. And hence the next day, we continue our celebration, even with the fears of the world around us: because God *is* with us, God *does* love us, and we have every reason to believe that the promise of peace on earth will still come true.

Amen.