**The Ugliness of Christmas**

A sermon for the Second Sunday of Christmastide, January 2, 2022

By the Rev. Christopher Wendell

St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Bedford, MA

Over this Christmas season, Nathan and AJ watched the movie Home Alone for the first time. This was a childhood classic for me, and it was fun to show it to them. Especially the final sequence in which the 8 year old Kevin booby traps his house to defend it from two buffoonish burglars who are trying to take advantage of a young child alone in the house. It’s a win on all fronts for the 8 year old, who successfully paint bombs, glue and feathers, and blowtorches the two intruders as he flees to safety. Or so he thinks. At the last minute the two burglars get a wave of inspiration, figure out where Kevin’s going next, and when young Kevin opens the door to what he thinks is an empty kitchen, there stand two very angry grown-ups. The mood turns instantly from playfully thrilling to deadly serious. They grab the child, pin him up against the door, as they prepare to literally bite his fingers off. Luckily Kevin is saved at the last minute by an old wise man and his snow shovel. He escapes unharmed.

Now, when I was a child, I hated this part of the movie. So much so, that I wouldn’t watch it. I would fast forward, leave the room, close my eyes, or do whatever I had to do to avoid seeing this scene. There was something about the way that this deadly serious moment of real danger had intruded on an otherwise uplifting, joyful, kid-victorious holiday movie that I just couldn’t stomach. Maybe it was because unlike so much of the rest of the movie which is kind of overacted and clownish…this scene was just too real. So I left that part out of the story.

Turns out, I’m not the only one who likes to leave out the upsetting parts of holiday stories. Here we are on the second Sunday in Christmas (it’s the 9th day, for those still counting), and the Gospel passage for today doesn’t exactly tell us the whole story. What we hear tells us about angels intervening in the dreams of Joseph, the heroic efforts taken by he and Mary to protect the young Jesus and become refugees in Egypt, and then, some years later, their return back to Galilee once the threat of Herod was gone. Told this way, it’s an exciting and exhilarating wrap up to the extended Christmas story – delivering the child Jesus and his family back to Nazareth after a sojourn in Egypt…both of which are necessary to fulfill certain old testament predictions about the geographical origins of the predicted Messiah.

But did you notice, that there are in fact three missing verses in this Gospel today? Well, there are. And it’s enough to form a short scene…one that, I’m afraid, is quite ugly. The missing verses read as follows:

**16**When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men,[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew%202%3A16-18&version=NRSV#fen-NRSV-23186a)] 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.[[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew%202%3A16-18&version=NRSV#fen-NRSV-23186b)] **17**Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

**18**“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.”

There’s nothing funny or clownish or heroic about this part of the Nativity story. It’s just very ugly. So much so that the people who put together our church’s lectionary left it out. It’s just not there. The best I can figure, this omission isn’t driven by some sense that these verses are less authentic than the others around them. Nor is it driven, as some omissions are, by the fact that it’s an unrelated anecdote interrupting the flow of the story. No. It’s part of the story. The only reason I can think of for this omission is that it’s just ugly. And we don’t like to think about ugly. Especially at church. Especially at Christmastime.

But aside from being very ugly, it’s also very real. Whether or not this Herod conducted this kind of massacre is hard to know for sure. But what’s not in dispute is that history has taught us that the Biblical Herod was neither the first nor the last maniacal ruler who was so paranoid about threats to his own power that he either directly harmed children or failed to act to protect them. I think of the drafting of child soldiers into mercenary armies in various places around the world. I think of immigrant children inhumanely detained. I think of the coverups of sexual abuse in various religious and civic organizations to protect those with institutional power. I think of the political reluctance to regulate automatic and semiautomatic guns that are used against children in vulnerable settings. And I’m sure there’s more. The point is there’s a reason we close our ears at this point in the story…because we know it speaks of truth, an ugly truth.

This part of the Christmas Gospel – human ugliness intruding on our preferred Christmas story of angles and shepherds and mangers and hope – presents us with a good question: What do we do with the ugliness of the world, when it confronts the more pleasant versions of truth that we prefer. Do we close our eyes and ignore it (if we can)? Do we allow the ugliness to throw us into despair that it is the only truth that matters? Or can we allow two things to be true at the same time? Can our souls allow Herodian ugliness in the world to be just as true and real as God’s redemption of humanity in Jesus’ birth?

The task of living a Christian life can be fairly summarized as living this third option. In fact, it’s so central to our discipleship to hold both these things in our hearts at the same time – the truth of the world’s ugliness and the truth that God has redeemed it with grace – that I’d say it’s more than a task. It’s a calling. It’s a vocation to hold these two truths at the same time for one’s whole life. It’s how we live a Way of Love in Jesus’ name that avoids both sentimentality on the one hand, and vindictiveness on the other.

During these past seven days of Christmastide, we’ve been invited to remember and give thanks for the life of one who lived this task, this calling, this vocation with such fullness in his day. I’m speaking of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the leader of the Anglican Church in South Africa in the decades when apartheid was being confronted, resisted, and ultimately dismantled. Offering national and international spiritual leadership through that period of protest, demand, reprisal, violence, and ultimately the birthing of a new commitment to justice in that nation demanded a close and intense attentiveness to the ugliness of his own place and time. And, it demanded a sense of hope that God was at work in redeeming even this ugliness – an ugliness that destroyed families and communities and nearly destroyed a nation. Archbishop Tutu, who died last Sunday, was somehow able to hold both these truths in his heart, and in his mind, and in his public and private speech, during these challenging years. And that enabled him, once legal apartheid had ended, to lead the national effort of truth-telling and reconciliation that were required to bring kind of healing and unity in the years that followed apartheid.

You see, I think the Archbishop realized that in addition to the fight to get whites to accept racial equality under the law, there was another fight still to come – to get all people to accept the dignity of every human being. This meant not just the dignity denied to blacks in South Africa for so long by whites, but the dignity that whites had lost for themselves in perpetrating that system of inhumanity upon their siblings in Christ. No law or statute could redeem that. But Archbishop Tutu knew that God could, with his help.

Alongside all the careful planning, serious administrating, intentional listening to testimony and careful creation of records about apartheid’s ugliness and of the desire of the nation to move into a new future together – Tutu also was an amazingly joyful person. I think this, more than anything else, drew people to him. He was not silly, but he had within him the capacity for laughter, for dancing, for joking, that was so deeply rooted it must have come from God. It must have come from his trust that God could redeem the ugliness of anything, that faith must give us the courage to face the truth. To do that, is to carry Jesus in our hearts. To do that is to be his disciple. To do that is to hold the beauty of God’s grace up to the ugliness of the world – not to shield ourselves from it, but as a mirror to reflect the image back that God sees, even when what we see looks so bleak.

And so, my friends, we must ask ourselves the question of today’s Gospel: how will we hold the ugliness of the world that we live in alongside the beautiful grace that God has given us at Christmas? Will we close our eyes to the ugly and live only in a fantasy story that ignores suffering? Will we abandon the gifts of the Incarnation – the sanctification and blessing and redeeming of our broken world – in favor of despair or retribution or despondency? Or will we accept the task, the calling, the vocation of the Christian life? Will we struggle and strive to hold multiple truths about life and the world and other people and institutions in our hearts? Will we be clear-eyed and sanguine about what is broken, and convinced that it can be healed? Will be joyful, light-hearted, curious, and persistent in our efforts to make the ugly of the world into something new? To that, I can only say, we will, with God’s help. Amen.