

# CARRIED AWAY

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**ISAIAH 63:7-9; MATTHEW 2:13-23**

**LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH**

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**DECEMBER 29, 2013/1<sup>ST</sup> SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS**

Even though we know that we are still technically in the season of Christmas—the twelve day feast between the celebration of Jesus’ birth and Epiphany—on this Sunday between Christmas and New Years, it always kind of feels like Christmas has come and gone.

Many people remark on feeling something like a let down. For many, the season has failed to live up to the hype. Six weeks of lights and Christmas music at the malls and anticipation of time with family... and then it’s gone and life resumes as it always was.

All of this frenzy of anticipation and excitement produced by advertisers is gone. All that is left to do is trudge back to the malls and try to get some good deals to ease the pain of another Christmas’s passing.

This is a bit of a caricature. But maybe not too much.

I was standing in line at a movie theatre this week and I couldn’t help but overhear the conversations. “How was your Christmas?” “Oh, pretty good.... I got a new \_\_\_ and the \_\_\_ I had been wanting for quite a while...” “I didn’t get \_\_\_, but I was at the mall early today and got a really good deal!”

Almost invariably, Christmas was evaluated according to what it delivered in terms of gifts and material possessions.

I kept waiting to hear something a bit more elevated in the conversations—something like, “Christmas was wonderful! I saw \_\_\_ again!” Or, “it was so good to just be together with people I love.” Or, in my most optimistic moments, “my hope was rekindled this Christmas!”

But I didn’t hear any of that. Maybe I need to listen in places other than the mall ☺.

As I was listening to these evaluations of Christmas, the thought occurred to me, “What

did *Jesus* get on that first Christmas?”

I did a quick tour of some of our most well loved lines from Christmas carols.

“Come and behold him, born the king of angels. O come let us adore him.”

“Yea Lord we greet thee, born this happy morning. Jesus to thee be all glory given!”

“Glory to the newborn king!”

“Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright... Holy infant so tender and mild, sleep in heavenly peace.”

“Christ by highest heaven adored, Christ the everlasting Lord. Come desire of nations come, fix in us thy humble home.

“Joy to the world! Let earth receive her king!”

How *did* earth receive her king?

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Well, in our gospel text today we see that earth’s reception of her king is a hostile one. We see that the “holy infant so tender and mild” is soon on the run from the murderous rage of the jealous tyrant, King Herod.

We see that adoration quickly gives way to fear and paranoia.

We see that earth did not receive her king very well.

No sooner does the desire of nations, the fulfillment of the hopes and fears of all the years arrive, than he and his parents are refugees, fleeing from Herod’s maniacal decree to slaughter all of the children under the age of two in the region of Bethlehem in order to guard his throne and preemptively deal with the threat he imagines is coming.

This is a nasty text for the Sunday after Christmas! But it is an important one for us to consider.

Let’s first look at the geography of the story.

Joseph and Mary flee to Egypt. What should this trigger in our minds?

Well, in the minds of Matthew's Jewish audience, it almost certainly would have called to mind an earlier part of their own story.

It was in Egypt, many years ago, that Jacob's family found refuge from a famine under the protection of another Joseph (the younger brother they had betrayed and sold into slavery!).

And it was *out of Egypt* that the children of Israel came when God delivered them from Pharaoh and called them to be his people in the book of Exodus.

Egypt was a place of oppression and deliverance for God's people. Jesus goes down into Egypt and comes back out, retracing the steps of his people.

And what of King Herod? Who might he call to mind?

Pharaoh.

In Exodus 1:15-22, we read that the Hebrew people were becoming too numerous in captivity in Egypt. Pharaoh commanded all Hebrew boys to be thrown into the Nile (disobedience of this command led to the birth of Moses—Exodus 2).

Herod goes even further in our text today, commanding the slaughter of all children under the age of two in or around Bethlehem!

Herod was a violent, paranoid man whose brutality was well known in the ancient world. He killed members of his own wife when he suspected them of scheming against him. He even gave orders to kill a number of leading citizens in Jericho when he was dying so that people would be weeping at his funeral!

One pun, attributed to the Roman emperor Augustus, alluding to the Jewish avoidance of pork, said, "it is better to be Herod's swine (*hus*) than Herod's son (*huios*)."

Violent, paranoid men have always acted thus.

Herod's behaviour is said to be a fulfillment of the prophecy in Jeremiah (Mat. 2:17-18), where Rachel is weeping for her children who have been taken into exile.

So Jesus is also symbolically participating in his people's exile and return.

We see that Matthew's narrative is not just about getting Jesus out of trouble; it is also about Jesus retracing Israel's steps, thus demonstrating that he is the one who will make Israel's story complete, he is the one who will bring this story to its climax and conclusion.

NT scholar Craig Gardner puts it like this:

By connecting Jesus' infancy with places such as these, Matthew makes it clear that Jesus' story is rooted in and gathers up the larger story of Israel... Matthew wants us to understand that Jesus' world did not receive him with hospitality. Jesus must begin his life as a homeless wanderer, threatened by the very world he comes to save.<sup>1</sup>

N.T. Wright puts it even more starkly:

The gospel of Jesus the Messiah was born, then, in a land and at a time of trouble, tension, violence and fear. Banish all thoughts of peaceful Christmas scenes. Before the Prince of Peace had learned to walk and talk, he was a homeless refugee with a price on his head... This is how Israel's redeemer was to appear; this is how God would set about liberating his people, and bringing justice to the whole world. No point in arriving in comfort, when the world is in misery; no point in having an easy life, when the world suffers violence and injustice! If he is to be Emmanuel, God-with-us, he must be with us where the pain is.<sup>2</sup>

In our gospel text today, we see Jesus being where the pain is.

The very Jesus who we sing triumphantly about at Christmas time, is whisked off in the middle of the night to a strange land by fearful and uncertain parents.

The very Jesus who comes to bear his people's burdens will be a helpless infant who needs to be lifted up and carried away in order to flee from violent, evil impulses that want nothing to do with his kingdom of peace.

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Our text from Isaiah takes place in dire circumstances. The context is judgment and exile, but the passage we heard is a communal song of hope and deliverance.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard B. Gardner, *Matthew: Believers Church Commentary* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1991), 56.

<sup>2</sup> N.T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone* (London: SPCK, 2004), 14-15.

It urges us to *remember*, to recount the gracious deeds of the Lord wherever we are, and whatever the circumstances we find ourselves in.

*Remember* what the Lord has done for you.

Even in dark times, the people of God were constantly encouraged to remember their story, to remember the mighty acts of God's deliverance in the past, and to renew their hope in the character and strength of God for the future.

Isaiah 63:7-9 is a song about the mercy and the steadfast love of God that endures and protects, even when things look very bleak.

*He became their savior in all their distress* (v. 9).

And we must remember that even though this text and our text from Matthew are separated by hundreds of years, it is the same God and the same story.

The baby who needed to be carried away to safety is also the one who, in love and mercy, redeems his people, who lifts *us* up and carries us, both now and in the age to come.

This is a good message for us, this Christmas season.

We recount the gracious deeds of God in the context of a world that is still broken.

The daily news offers no shortage of reminders. War in Syria, with countless people, like Jesus and Mary and Joseph, fleeing their homes in fear.

Suicide bombings in Russia.

Conflict and corruption, poverty and despair in South Sudan and the Central African Republic.

The list could go on.

Part of the mystery of God's dwelling among us is that God comes to us in the midst of our distress; God enters the human mess, the distress. God is not immune from the pain and uncertainty of a broken world, as our text from Matthew makes clear.

We wish God would just come and clean it all up with a mighty display of power. I

know that I do! I wish that Jesus' first coming had introduced the final, decisive defeat of all that opposes God's *shalom* in the world.

But God chooses a different way. God chooses to redeem the evil of the world by entering into it and subverting it from within, and working through the hearts and minds and hands and feet and voices of people who freely choose to follow his path to peace.

It is a victory that is gradually implemented—and one that involves us in the process.

This is just one of many apparent paradoxes of the Christian faith.

Apparent weakness is strength.

Apparent defeat is victory.

The first are last.

Wisdom is foolishness.

The poor are blessed.

The barren woman gives birth to a child.

The outcast and the foreigner are brought into the family to play a central role.

The “righteous” and the religious are condemned. The guilty are set free.

The powerful are brought low. The lowly are raised up.

A child shall lead them.

The one who needed to be carried away to safety is the one who carries us and who carries and sustains the world he loves.

I think that all of us can look back on our own lives and remember instances where the way forward looked unclear, or times when we were afraid and uncertain or bent over with pain... and God carried us.

God didn't magically remove us from the mess, but God was there with us, steering, guiding, encouraging, and illuminating the path.

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*Lifting us up.*

This is how God works in the world and in our lives.

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Earlier I asked the question, “How *did* earth receive her king?”

But the question is not just a historical one. It is asked of us each year.

How *do we* receive our king? Today.

Do we allow God to enter into the mess and the distress of our stories, and reorient us?

Do our hearts expand to welcome those Jesus welcomed? The poor, the meek, the homeless wanderer, the refugee?

Do we allow this little refugee to carry us along in the advancing of his kingdom of peace?

If we don’t—if Christmas becomes for us just another warm, fuzzy holiday full of tinsel and lights that celebrates that God is on our team and exults in the warm consumeristic glow of the season—then we will have not have received our king well.

We will not have received our king as we ought to have. We only receive our king when we receive his kingdom, and participate in God’s will being done, on earth as in heaven.

Many of you are familiar with Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He was a German pastor and theologian who lived and worked under the looming shadow of Nazi Germany in World War II.

He was one of a minority of pastors and church leaders who consistently spoke out against Hitler and his policies.

He spent the last two years of his life in a prison cell as a result of his resistance.

I took a course on Bonhoeffer during my last year at Regent College, and for this course we had to read pretty much everything he had written, including papers and letters from prison.

Despite overwhelmingly difficult personal circumstances, and despite living during evil times on the global stage, Bonhoeffer was unshakeably convinced that God was carrying him.

I close with his words, taken from an Advent collection called *God is in the Manger*:

Who among us will celebrate Christmas correctly? Whoever finally lays down all power, all honor, all reputation, all vanity, all arrogance, all individualism beside the manger; whoever remains lowly and lets God alone be high; whoever looks at the child in the manger and sees the glory of God precisely in his lowliness.<sup>3</sup>

May God help us to *look*... to *see*... and to *receive* our king.



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<sup>3</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "I Want to Live These Days with You," quoted in *God is in the Manger: Reflections on Advent and Christmas* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 26.