

“The Christmas Conundrum”

Psalm 72:1-17; Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

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A Sunday School teacher told her class of fourth graders Matthew’s Christmas story (Matt. 2:1-12) about the Magi bringing gifts to the baby Jesus.

One student who had recently become the big sister of a baby brother said, “Well, I guess gold and all that stuff are all right, but I’ll bet Mary really wished somebody had brought some diapers.”

Would that Mary’s problem have been such a simple Christmas conundrum. Her problem was far more intricate and difficult, and as fresh as today: continuing of sin and evil after the Savior has come.

Mary would have been happy to have a lack of diapers be her biggest problem. The Gospel tells us that the wise men’s curiosity about this child whose birth was heralded by a star in the East aroused the fear and wrath of King Herod, who tolerated no threat to his rule. As the reading ends, the magi were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, and so returned home by another route.

Today’s reading ends there but the story goes on. Being warned in a dream, Mary and Joseph escape with Jesus to Egypt (2:13-15). The Holy Innocents of Bethlehem were not so fortunate. These children, aged two and younger, were slaughtered out of Herod’s fear that among them was the child who would take over his kingship (16-18). It is a gruesome, sad tale with echoes as close as Sandy Hook.

Have we learned nothing in 2,000 years? Still, we cannot keep our suffering or the world’s at arm’s length: the Christmas conundrum.

Once upon a Christmas—not this Christmas, but not so long ago, either—the choir of my church asked me to lead the prayer before worship on the Sunday before Christmas. They took turns being led in prayer by their members, but this Sunday they asked me.

I was happy to pray but told them that I did not have the Christmas spirit that year. The reasons were many, both personal and in the life of that church and its members. Certainly the war at that time; illnesses in the family; my sons growing up and several December Sunday snowstorms all played a part.

I share this because some of you shared you had a Christmas like that *this* year. The tension in this struggle is letting ourselves feel whatever it is—loss, sadness, emptiness, anger—and acknowledging that while the Savior has come, and we are that much worth saving, the salvation plan is not yet complete.

One of my favorite Christmas poems was written by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Just after the opening of the Civil War, his wife Fanny died in a fire in their home, a devastating loss. On the second Christmas after her death he wrote that a Merry Christmas “is no more for me.” Then, in 1863, just before the third Christmas after Fanny’s death, he learned that his son Charles was severely wounded fighting for the Union Army. He traveled south, found his son, and brought him home.

And he penned verses that touched the soul of a nation:

*I heard the bells on Christmas Day their old familiar carols play,
and wild and sweet the words repeat of peace on earth,
good-will to men!*

Some of those verses don’t make it into Christmas cards:

*Then from each black, accursed mouth
the cannon thundered in the South, and with the sound the carols
drowned of peace on earth, good-will to men!*

No wonder he expressed what all of us may be tempted to feel:

*And in despair I bowed my head; “There is no peace on earth,” I said:
“For hate is strong, and mocks the song
of peace on earth, good will to men!”*

But then Longfellow caught a glimpse of hope, reflected in Isaiah's reading, the Psalm, and even the magi's wisdom to go home "by another way." Deep in his soul, the stirring of hope declared:

*Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
"God is not dead: nor doth he sleep!
The Wrong shall fail, the Right prevail,
with peace on earth, good-will to men!"*

In 1809 Europe was at war. The Austrian composer, Franz Joseph Haydn, the great composer whose country was embroiled in the hostilities, had every reason to be despondent. Yet he wrote music so joyful that he was criticized for it. In response to his critics Haydn declared, "*When I think of God, my heart is so filled with joy that the notes fly off as from a spindle.*"

The answer to the Christmas conundrum is to focus on the triumph of the cross that redeems the tragedy of the world; and the Christ who redeems us despite the sin that surrounds us.

The splendor of Christmas shines in the face of the world our world offers. For in tough times Christ comes: then and now. Here, in tough times, the Christmas message has the most to say and can be heard the clearest. It is here, at the table of the Lord, that we ingest these symbols that tell us just how far Christ will go to complete our salvation: with his life itself.

So let us follow the star and, with deeds and lives illumined by its brightness, pay homage to Christ.