

“Sometimes We Just Don’t Know When to Quit”

Matthew 2:13-23

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Sometimes we just don’t know when to quit. I’m not talking just about preachers, though we are among the worst offenders, but we have an excuse. Anyone who has read anything the Apostle Paul wrote realizes he didn’t know how to end a sentence much less a letter. He said “finally” so often that no one could have thought he was about to finish. The tendency to ramble is an ancient hazard for preachers. When Dana’s mother’s pastor from childhood preached, she would say, “That horse has circled the barn several times. I wish he would go in!”

And yet, preachers are not the only people who don’t know when to quit. Many politicians have this problem as do some musicians. As wonderful as “Messiah” is, Handel can repeat himself a bit too much. I enjoy the music of pianist George Winston, but I wonder at times if he will ever end a song! I don’t know what it is about us as human beings, but sometimes we just don’t know when to quit.

This seems to be Matthew’s problem. He begins his Christmas trilogy with a nice story about Mary and Joseph and a baby named Jesus. He proceeds with a rich tale about wise men from the East who come to worship the child and bring him gifts. But Matthew just doesn’t know when to quit. He has a good thing going, but he goes on one story too many. The third story in his Christmas collection is a story about Herod seeking to destroy Jesus, about Mary and Joseph sneaking out of town, about countless children ages two and under in and around Bethlehem being slaughtered because of Herod’s anger. What is Matthew thinking? This is not what we want to hear the week after Christmas!

And yet, before we get carried away in our criticism, we may want to consider the possibility that there could be a reason why Matthew includes this story. Perhaps the Christmas story is not complete without this narrative. Perhaps there is something here which helps us understand how the Christmas story plays in the real world.

One thing this story tells us is that, when Jesus is born in Bethlehem, Herod wakes up in Jerusalem. We tend to think of the Christmas story as a nice, little tale that everyone greets with enthusiasm. It is not. Not everyone is happy that a new king is born, especially not the present king! Herod is threatened when the wise men tell him that a child is born king of the Jews and that this king has his own star. Herod questions the wise men, uses them to scout out the territory and then plots to kill the child. When Herod learns that the wise men have slipped out of town without reporting back to him, he kills all the children in the area of an appropriate age in an attempt to get Jesus, but fails. Mary and Joseph slip out of town and make their way to Egypt, but years later, when they try to return home, there is another Herod waiting on the scene, forcing them to live in Nazareth.

The message is that, whenever Jesus is born in Bethlehem, Herod wakes up in Jerusalem. It is not simply a matter of one ruler being threatened by the birth of one child. It is a matter of opposition arising whenever the Spirit of the Christ enters this world. When Christ is born, he seeks justice and righteousness in a way that threatens established power structures. When Christ is born, he seeks peace and love, which we would like to think are universally desired, but know deep down can be subversive and thus inspire resistance. When Christ is born, he seeks lordship over those who previously have bowed to other lords and these other lords are rarely content to give up their lordship without a fight.

The drug dealer who changes his ways in the light of inner transformation risks violence at the hands of those he did business with before. The pastors and Imams who worked for peace in Liberia during the civil war of the late 1980's and early 1990's were targeted for beheading by warlords who were vying for power. When film character Michael Clayton blows the whistle on the company his firm represents because their product kills innocents, he inspires the wrath not only of the company, but of the partners in his firm. Growing a conscience is rarely a universally appreciated act. Allowing the Spirit of Christ to transform us is ultimately rewarding, but not without risks and costs.

The challenge is the church in our culture seems to have missed this memo. Many people believe that, if only we are faithful as

individuals, we will be rewarded in this life, and if we are doing what we ought to be doing as a church, not meddling in controversy, we will succeed in all we do. Do right and our efforts will be honored. Prove faithful and God will reward us with a peaceful existence. It didn't work this way for Jesus or many of his followers over the years.

Consider the experience of the wise men. They follow their discernment of heavenly things and want to worship the child who is born. They don't want to stir up controversy. They are not looking for trouble. Yet they cannot get to Bethlehem without going through Jerusalem. They cannot worship Jesus without disturbing Herod.

In like manner, we may not have any fondness for controversy. We may long for the kind of sweet-spirited unity that makes everyone feel good. And this longing is noble. Keeping our hearts and minds fixed on worship and devotion to God is a high calling. As 19th-century Danish thinker Soren Kierkegaard put it, purity of heart is to will one thing – to seek the Eternal (*Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing*, p. 32). Yet when we devote our will to Christ, we encounter resistance.

This was the case for early disciples whose beliefs put them at odds with the Roman Empire. They were persecuted and put to death. This was the case for early Baptists in seventeenth-century England. They were imprisoned and put to death. This was the case for believers in the Confessional Church of Germany in the 1930's who went public with their confession, "We are the body of Christ. We cannot keep silent in the face of state terror and oppression. We have no Fuhrer but Jesus Christ." It was a risky thing to do. Some members of the church were jailed; others, like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, were executed.

Clarence Jordan faced similar resistance when he founded an intentional, interracial community called Koinonia Farm in Americus, Georgia, in 1942. Hector Gallego experienced even more resistance when, in seeking to follow Jesus' example of proclaiming good news to the poor and delivering the oppressed, he mobilized poor farm workers in his parish in Colombia in the late 1960's. The powerbrokers of the community burned down his two-room shack on May 23, 1971 and he was fortunate to escape, but during the night on June 9, 1971 he was taken away and never seen again.

So, what is the message for us, that we are not following Jesus unless our life is threatened? No, that would be stretching things too far. But there is a great deal of distance between where most of us live and where the Gospel has called the faithful in times of challenge. Perhaps our context does not require us to put our life on the line, but there may be ways in which we are called to show a bit more courage in standing up for what we believe about things like bullying in schools, the treatment of immigrants, the idolatry of materialism, the slandering of all Muslims based on the behavior of a small percentage, the belittling of God's children because of various superficial differences.

African-American pastor Fred Shuttlesworth affirmed the insight of William Holmes Borders, who said that the Gospel will get you into trouble but God will get you out. He went on to add that, if we are not stirring up some resistance, we are not doing the Gospel (*A Fire You Cannot Put Out*, Andrew Manis, p. 220). It is difficult to argue with this thesis, especially in light of today's troublesome reading from Matthew.

So, one thing this story tells us is that, when Jesus is born in Bethlehem, Herod wakes up in Jerusalem. Another thing this story tells us is that, even though Herod awakes, God is still alive. In other words, even though the faithful encounter resistance, God's ways will ultimately prevail. Herod goes on a rampage killing children, but Mary and Joseph are warned in a dream and thus, the Messiah escapes harm, at least at this point. The holy family flees under the cover of darkness to Egypt, as many flee violence today in places like Syria.

So, there is good news here, sort of... The human stuff in this story is clear, though messy and unsettling. The world often responds with hostility to Jesus' ministry of justice and love. We get this. But the God stuff here is confusing. The story claims that God protects Jesus and his family, but what about all the children who are killed? What are we to make of this part of the story?

If a paranoid dictator had taken life and God had not intervened, we could understand this. We have seen this story before, in Nazi Germany and Soviet Siberia, for example. I think of a scene in the film "Murderers Among Us: The Simon Wiesenthal Story." Having

witnessed two horrid atrocities, a guard taking pleasure at killing two Jews with one bullet and guards killing Jews so that they fall into a burial ditch, Wiesenthal says, “God must be on leave.” In the face of such atrocities, what else can we conclude? God does not cause evil acts, but sometimes God does not stop them either. So, God must be on leave. This is a difficult conclusion, even if we argue that free will is critical to our capacity to love, but it is an understandable conclusion.

But what do we do when God seems to intervene selectively, protecting one child and not another or hundreds or thousands of others? This is what Matthew’s story seems to claim. Some will argue that saving Jesus’ life is critical for the salvation of millions. So, this one act of intervention is justified. But this does not answer the question of why God does not save the others. What kind of God could be so callous?

In his book *A Grief Observed*, written in response to an experience of loss, C.S. Lewis says that what he fears most is not ceasing to believe in God, but coming to believe dreadful things about God. The conclusion I dread, he says, is not, “So there’s no God after all,” but, “So this is what God’s really like. Deceive yourself no longer.”

This is what many of us fear most in the light of suffering we face and some biblical stories we read. Many people want to find comfort in a direct view of providence. *Everything happens for a reason. God has a plan, we just don’t know what it is. All things work together for good.* Some people make this theology work for a time, but there are experiences which expose its limitations.

I worked with a man who tried to hold on to a rigid view of providence even through the death of a teenage child. Deep down he was in pain, he was angry at God, but the theology he had been raised with required him to say this was God’s will, God had a plan, he had to trust God. This worked for a time, but then a second child, his only other child, was killed in an accident, and all you-know-what broke loose inside of him. The theology of his childhood no longer worked. He was forced to work through his experience in a different way. There was a good bit of deconstruction before there was any reconstruction. In the end, he found a way to hold on to his faith, but only after he was willing to let go of some beliefs and leave some questions unanswered.

That is about the only way I know to address some life experiences and to read the story in Matthew 2. It is wonderful that God protects Jesus, Mary and Joseph, but why God does not protect the others I do not know or understand. The only good news here is that God's ways cannot be ultimately thwarted. Jesus will live to do his work. But the details here are troubling. It's like reading the book of Revelation. The big picture message is clear and true – God wins; after all the conflict between good and evil, good come out on top; God wins! I can place my trust here, but the details of the story are messy.

When I read this story, I think of a conversation I had with CBF missionary Sam Harrell on August 7, 1998. The U.S. Embassy in Nairobi had just been bombed by Al Qaida and over 200 people were killed. Since the Harrells lived in Nairobi not far from the Embassy, I called Sam in concern to see if he, Mel and the boys were "O.K." I was thrilled to hear his voice. Yes, they were fine, he and one of the boys were quite close to the Embassy, but they were unharmed.

But, Sam said, they were not really "O.K." How could they be when so many had died? How could they even thank God, though they were thankful to be alive, because surely God had not spared them and left others to perish? Where they really needed to spend their energy, Sam said, was in figuring out how to help the families of those who had been in harm's way, those who had been injured and all who would be affected by this act of terror.

That kind of response is why I think so much of Sam and perhaps it offers a possibility for how we might respond to Matthew's third Christmas story. We are thankful that Jesus lives to accomplish all he does, but there are parts of this story that defy understanding. Where we need to put our energy, though, is in responding to the brokenness of this world, caring for innocents who suffer. When we do, we may encounter the wrath of Herod, and there is no guarantee of protection in this life. There are only the assurances that God's ways will ultimately prevail and that we can find no better place to be than in the very center of God's will. But then, these assurances are all we really need.