

“Fairy Tales, Real Life, and Where God Is”

Matthew 2:13–23

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In his book *It Was on Fire When I Lay Down on It* (p. 145) Robert Fulghum says that, whenever he told a story to his children when they were small and added the customary fairy tale ending, “And they lived happily ever after,” one would always ask, “And THEN what happened?” How could he tell them that Cinderella discovered she was married to a guy with a foot fetish and that glass slippers hurt like...? How could he tell them that the frog who was kissed by the princess might have turned into a prince, but still had the personality of a frog and ate flies for breakfast? In short, how could he tell them the truth about what happens next after the fairy tale ends and real life begins?

Children have a way of getting right to the heart of a matter. They are refreshingly, though at times also disturbingly, honest. And in this case, it’s not just that real life is messier than fairy tales; fairy tales are often messier than we assume. Consider the story of Hansel and Gretel. A witch who wants to eat children does not seem very idyllic to me. Or consider the wedding of Prince Charles and Lady Diana Spencer on July 29, 1981, which the presiding Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Runcie, referred to as “the stuff of fairy tales.” He went on to critique this image, but we know now that not only was the marriage no fairy tale, the wedding was no singular experience of joy for the bride or groom.

Something similar could be said of our reading from Matthew 2. This story follows what is often viewed as the fairy tale beginning of Jesus, but only if we sanitize the story. According to scripture, Jesus is born in scandal and hardship to unwed parents in an animal shed after traveling across the country at the whim of a foreign oppressor. That doesn’t sound very idyllic either! But this is the gentle part of the story because right after describing Jesus’ birth, Matthew tells us about the visit of the Magi, which introduces the threat of Herod, which then is fully realized in what we read about today.

There is no corroboration of the story known as “the slaughter of the innocents” outside of scripture and Christian tradition, but it fits with what we know of Herod, a man so paranoid, narcissistic, and power-obsessed that he has a wife and two children murdered. We don’t know how many children live in and around Bethlehem at this time. It is a small village. It may be just five to ten children who are killed in an effort to get Jesus, but this does not make the act less brutal. Herod has all the young children in a tight-knit community like our church killed.

After the fairy tale, albeit messy, birth of Jesus, and the visitation of the Magi, this is what happens?! This is what Matthew writes about?! This is what the lectionary editors choose?! It is just one more reason for any pastor with a whit of sense to take this Sunday off! And yet, the story is here, one presumes for a reason. It needs to be taken seriously. I have no intention of cleaning it up or trying to explain or rationalize its brutality. But could there be a message here for us, something important to observe and ponder?

Some view this as a story that demonstrates God’s protection of the Messiah, and Jesus’ life is spared because an angel warns Joseph and he listens. But at what cost is Jesus’ life protected? And these children are not simply collateral damage, they are not victims of violence Herod would have committed anyway. They are killed because of Jesus. Drawing conclusions about God’s providential care is a precarious enterprise under any circumstances, but doing so from this story is pure madness!

Others see insight into the darker side of human potential, as well as the need for space to grieve in times of sadness. And there is validity to both these claims. In Herod’s actions, sadly, we see a part of the human condition that has always existed, one that exists to this day. How many innocents has Vladimir Putin slaughtered in Ukraine? There were 611 mass shootings in this nation in 2022 and 43,897 people who died from gun-related events. It is not a pleasant reality, but we need to recognize the darker side of human potential.

And in the fulfillment of Jeremiah’s words about a voice heard in Ramah, with wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her

children, refusing to be consoled because they are no more, we find permission to grieve painful losses without giving in to superficial assurances about God's timing or Heaven's need for another angel. It is a helpful word in a world filled deep sadness and shallow piety. Especially this time of year, it is critical to hold up examples of good and faithful people who weep openly because they are sad.

But while both these insights are appropriate, the central message seems be about God's willingness to identify with every aspect of human experience, including the messiest and most challenging parts imaginable. In the reading from Isaiah, God talks about saving God's people not through some proxy like an angel, but with personal presence, lifting and carrying them. The reading from Hebrews says that because Jesus is tested personally by what he suffers, he is able to help others who are tested. Throughout the Gospel accounts, we see God in Christ doing just this, and it begins with these childhood narratives.

First, Jesus is born in an animal shed among common people. Now, his life is at risk because of a brutal yet insecure political leader. He and his family are forced to become refugees in a strange land with a complex history for Jesus' people. Thus, from the very beginning, the Messiah makes a home among the poor and outcast. He is oppressed and persecuted, forced to become an undocumented alien in a foreign land, part of a family on the run in a desperate attempt to save their own lives. To say the least, it is not how we might imagine the Savior of the world beginning his life and ministry.

At the beginning of Advent, I shared with some of you a letter I received from a man in our community, urging pastors to address a great heresy. What is this dangerous teaching? The claim that Jesus was born in an animal shed among common people. God would not allow the Chosen One to be born in such humble circumstances, the man claims!

Well, what would he think of the Messiah being run out of town and sent across the border?! And it doesn't stop here. Jesus' entire life is spent among the people he has come to save, experiencing everything we experience, the good and the bad. This isn't a mistake. This is how it is supposed to be. Scandalous though it may seem, it is a part of how God saves us, by identifying with us.

I think of the lyrics of a Joan Osborne Song (“One of Us”).

What if God was one of us?
Just a slob like one of us
Just a stranger on the bus
Tryin' to make his way home?

This may sound offensive, irreverent, scandalous even, but it is also hopeful, because it means we worship a God who is not far removed from our everyday joys and struggles. We worship a God who is right here with us, not just in a sacred place and time like this, but in the messiest and most difficult moments of our lives.

In their book *Flawed Families of the Bible* (pp. 13–14), David and Diana Garland say the stories about families in scripture are raw and uncensored. They offer reminders of how awful family life can become. These stories are vital to our understanding of God, faith, ourselves, and the world because they are honest. And yet, they are also full of hope because it is in those broken places that we catch glimpses of God’s grace and healing, of God silently reaching in to touch the wound.

To illustrate this reality, the Garlands use a story Franciscan Richard Rohr tells about Navajo rug weaving. The rugs are beautifully handcrafted with great precision, but in one corner of each rug is an obvious flaw. If one asks why this is the case, the rug maker will reply, “This is where the spirit moves in and out.”

It is not the only place God works. God is present in joy, empowering us, and God is in the ordinary moments too, but to say that God is present in our biggest messes – the family argument, the struggle with addiction, the separation and divorce – is the most extreme of assertions. Yet this is the claim of the biblical story. Christ is born in a shed and nearly killed as a child. God is with us even at our worst and most vulnerable, and it is here that God often works most effectively, or perhaps it is simply where we know our need and allow God to work.

But if all of this is true, what might it say not just about God, but about how we might live our lives? Many of us grew up with a word of

caution about hanging out with the wrong people or in the wrong places. And when we are young and vulnerable, we need protection. But when we grow older and the concern is more about reputation than safety, the argument is less compelling in an authentically Christian context. With whom would Jesus spend his time? To what places would he not go?

If we look at his life, beginning with his birth and early experience as a refugee, it seems pretty clear that he would hang out at the bars and in the prisons and half-way houses, on the border with immigrants and at drag shows, in the fields with farmers and with workers at construction sites, anywhere and everywhere people are in need, no matter what the risk. That is where we are called to go.

In the familiar parable about sheep and goats, recorded in Matthew 25, Jesus says that whenever we give food to the hungry or water to the thirsty, welcome a stranger (that is, immigrant) or give clothing to someone in need, visit the sick or the prisoner, it is actually him we are helping (vv. 31-45).

It is our calling to do this, the text says, and it may seem like a new theological claim as well — that Christ is present in these people we seek to help — but this claim is not new. Matthew ends his account of the Gospel where he begins it. This is just another way of talking about incarnation, Emmanuel, God-With-Us everywhere, even in the messiest places we can imagine.

Maybe this is a fairy tale after all, even with all its messiness, the greatest fairy tale of all... and the best thing about it is that it is true.