

The Rev. Dr. Hilary B. Smith

Holy Comforter

Richmond, VA

January 3, 2016; the 2nd Sunday after Christmas

Readings: Jeremiah 31:7-14; Psalm 84; Ephesians 1:3-6, 15-19a;

Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23.

The Whole Story of Christmas

I long time ago, in what seems now like a galaxy far far away, before the internet, before cable, we had three TV channels and only one came in well, in Northern Vermont where I spent five years of my childhood.

Maybe that's why I remember some of the books I had at that age so well. One in particular, called *Sugarcane Island* published in 1976, the very first of the Choose Your Own Ending books, which became know as the Choose Your Own Adventure books.

In 1976, I had that first edition of the first book because my cousin Ray, R. A. Montgomery, published it.¹

Edward Packard, the author, was turned down by many publishers, but Ray, who had a small publishing company in Vermont, saw the promise and potential of the work.

Ray went on to write many of the books in that series.

As you read those books, you come to places in the story when you are given a choice, turn to page 25 and this happens or turn to page 30 and this happens.

I remember that if I didn't follow the story but tried to look ahead at the choices, it wouldn't make any sense, I wouldn't know what to do or even what I wanted to do.

The story of Christmas can be like this too.

We need to know the whole story, as presented in the Bible.

¹http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/20/business/ra-montgomery-publisher-of-the-choose-your-own-adventure-series-dies-at-78-.html?_r=0

Know it in the sense of really taking it on as our own...that we might inwardly digest it, as one of our prayers puts it.

In our Collect for the Day, our prayer for the day, we have prayed to God that we might share the divine life of Christ.

Which is another way of asking that we might share in the story of Christ as we have received it, while also being aware that Christ continues to live with us, and in us, and through us.

We need to know the story, and know that the story is on-going.

There is a part of the Christmas story that we do not hear much.

And that is the story of Mary and Joseph fleeing to Egypt with Jesus to save him from Herod who wanted to kill him.

I did not know this part of the story well, in the sense of spending time with it, until I did the 30-day Ignatian retreat.

On that retreat, one prays with every aspect of Jesus' life for extended periods of time...and when I did so with the flight to Egypt, I had a sense that I was learning about it, entering into it, for the first time...that "meeting Jesus again for the first time" feeling.

I had not had much time with this part of the story, and I dare say, you have not, at least not from being in church around the holidays.

Right?

The first Sunday after Christmas we have lessons and carols and often on the second Sunday after Christmas, we focus on the wise men...understandably so, all this is much more positive, bringing gifts to Jesus is a much happier focus for the day.

And, hey, Christmas is such a short season, can't we just focus for these two weeks on the joy of Christmas?

Do we have to speak of the flight to Egypt and the slaughter of all the male children in and around Bethlehem under the age of 2 by Herod?

In fact our lectionary reading from Matthew for today omitted verses 16-18, which contains the story of Herod's slaughter of the holy innocents of

Bethlehem,

16 When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, 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. 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.’*

The reason these verses were omitted today is because we have a whole day set aside, December 28th, to talk about that event, but most churches did not hold a service that day, so again we don't spend time with it.

Christmas is so much more when we have the whole story... it is about joy, joy to the world the Lord has come, but this is a joy that is hardy, a joy that can handle the bad times, a joy that does not depend on all things going well.

What can being with the story of the flight to Egypt be for us?

We can take in that this is the world into which Jesus was born; a world where families have to flee those who would kill them, we call that being a refugees in our time.

We can be with the holy family---so much love for each other, so much love for God, but the circumstances did not let them rest in that joy; they had to go to another country, they had to hope that they would find a place there to escape the threat.

Already displaced on the night Mary gives birth, having been required to

travel by the political authorities...they did not care Mary was about to

give birth...already on the move, they have to move again under great threat.

This is the world into which Jesus was born.

And this is the strength of Christmas; this is the joy of Christmas, that our story of salvation, that God's story of salvation with us is hardy...it can handle the worst.

Christ was born for us, a vulnerable baby, to experience every aspect of life so that God could be there for us and for all...God with us on the run, on the road.

Our Christmas story is not a fairy tale...it is a real life story, in which innocent children die, in which powerful people care only about maintaining power with no regard for the well-being of others.

Why spend time with these parts of the Christmas story?

Well, it is as if God is calling us and the world to see...to see the holy family for what they were, in addition to being holy and blessed by God, they were refugees.

I've heard that half of the Syrian refugees are children.

Children and families caught up in the drama of powerful rulers desire for control.

The Syrian Crisis is affecting more than 12 million people.

The World Vision website gives three reasons for why Syrians are fleeing their homes:

1. Violence: Since the Syrian civil war began, 320,000 people have been killed, including nearly 12,000 children. About 1.5 million people have been wounded or permanently disabled, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. The war has become more deadly since foreign powers joined the conflict.

2. Collapsed infrastructure: Within Syria, healthcare, education systems, and other infrastructure have been destroyed; the economy is shattered.
3. Children's safety: Syrian children — the nation's hope for a better future — have lost loved ones, suffered injuries, missed years of schooling, and witnessed violence and brutality. Warring parties forcibly recruit children to serve as fighters, human shields, and in support roles, according to the U.S. State Department.²

These are children and families who like the holy family, long for a place to rest, to be safe, to care for their children.

It is really that simple.

You know these things, you probably know all or most of what I have said, but we need to say these things in church because many others focus on fear, and we need to say these things in church because we follow the way of Jesus, who made his way in the world as a child refugee, and who calls us to walk with him, and be his friends around this issue in our time.

Does the Christ-child cry out to us, urging us to see him in the refugees?

Can we see Christ in them?

Can we serve Christ in them?

I think we can; I know this is a church community that will not be led by fear,

but by joy...joy in knowing that the Lord has come, that Christ is with us, so close to us always and we often feel that most when we are helping others, we know it to be true, that God is with us.

These Christmas stories, of the flight to Egypt and the slaughter of in the

² <http://www.worldvision.org/news-stories-videos/syria-war-refugee-crisis#sthash.NDYMt26Y.dpuf>

innocents, are Christmas stories for those who celebrate the holy day and the holy season of Christmas, who really believe in Christmas, who open ourselves to be transformed by Christmas...the joy of knowing that God is with us, sharing every aspect of our lives, and that through Christ, we do share in the divine life.

Because we have free-will, we do get to chose, to chose our own ending, our own adventure with God, as much as that is in our control. To know what choice we want to make, we need to know the story in full. We share in the story of Christ, and we have a part to play in the on-going story of the divine life, of God with us.

As I did for our Christmas sermon, I will conclude with these words from Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153). Let us pray:

*You have come
to us as a small child,
but you have
brought us the greatest
of all gifts, the gift
of eternal love.
Caress us with your
tiny hands, embrace us
with your tiny arms,
and pierce our hearts with
your soft, sweet cries.*³

Amen.

³ Quoted in, *Imaging the Word, An Arts and Lectionary Resource*, vol. 2, editor, Susan A. Blain, Cleveland: United Church Press, 1995, p. 105.