

The Strength of the Fragile

First Sunday of Christmas
The Reverend J. Stewart Hardy

December 30, 2007
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Isaiah 63: 7-9; Psalm 148; Hebrews 2:10-18; Matthew 2:13-23

Christmas, as fragile as an ornament on a Christmas tree, so delicate, so beautiful, yet so easily destroyed. Christmas has certainly seemed fragile with the assassination of Benazir Bhutto. It seems as though we live in a world of increasingly fragile lives. It seems like we live in an increasingly fragile world. That is, until we read this morning's gospel. Mary, Joseph and the baby in flight for their lives and the life of their baby. Herod breathing fire and threats and sending his troops to slaughter every tiny babe in and around Bethlehem that they can find.

Things don't seem to have changed that much at all, do they? Or have they, in fact, changed very dramatically. Changed so much that they have actually turned things on their head. Not that such change is immediately self evident, but in a way that is hidden. Yet, if we have the eyes, we can actually find it and discover it is in plain sight. The gospel tells of this dramatic change and how it relates to the decisions people make, or fail to make. Decisions that will change not only the direction of their lives, but will change the direction of the whole world.

What if the Wise Men had ignored the dream they had, and stopped back to see Herod on their way home? What if Joseph had decided to go somewhere he thought was safer than Egypt? Would salvation history have been different forever? We will never know. Matthew's troubling tale reminds us all liberation costs, freedom is not free, and real life is full of danger and risk. As Joseph, Mary and Jesus traveled to Egypt ancient Rabbis tell us that they came upon a small peasant village. There, a peasant woman offered them shelter overnight and warm water to bathe the Christ child. Afterwards, the woman bathed her own tiny son in the water in which Jesus himself had been bathed. That peasant child the rabbis say, suffered from leprosy, but he emerged from the water clean and healed. The name of the child they say was Sunset or Dismas.

Sometimes when we pass through the gateways and doorways of our choices, we take the risk that we will actually suffer. What is it that they say? No good deed goes unpunished. There was a young father driving home from work when he saw a youngster falling through the ice on a pond that he was passing. He stripped off his coat, jacket and pants, and slid out onto the ice. Somehow he was able to get the kid out of the water and back to the shore, only to find that his wallet, credit cards, and the groceries he was taking home had all been stolen. Sometimes stopping to help someone puts the helper in more danger than the helped. The innocent you see, the innocent do suffer. There are no completely safe choices.

Just before dawn on a cold winter morning in 1849, a group of Russian criminals were led out to face a firing squad. One of them was called Feodor Dostoyevsky. All of these men facing the firing squad were revolutionaries. They plotted to overthrow the brutal Czar Nicholas I; several were professed atheists and all of them were radical, and probably these days would be called theorists. A priest carrying a cross and a Bible accompanied them. The first three were handed white gowns and shapeless caps and ordered to put them on. Then they were tied to posts. The firing squad raised their guns and took aim. Drums rolled. Just at that moment a signal came, and the rifles were lowered. A horseman came galloping in on the scene and announced a reprieve.

Although the condemned men didn't know it, the whole thing was a set up. The Czar was attempting to show people that he wasn't brutal at all, but in fact was a man of great compassion and understanding and mercy. That understanding, compassionate Czar then had these young man shipped off to Siberia. One of the men who faced that firing squad went mad. Another went on to become one of the world's greatest writers. For that was the moment that changed Dostoevsky's life for good. Facing the absolute certainty of death shattered all of the assumptions upon which he had built his life, and sent him on a whole new course to reclaim the Russian Orthodox faith of his childhood. He came to see in the lives of the peasant convicts around him a divine light. The hardened, poor, largely illiterate peasants were people of enormous dignity and great heart. The more he was with them, the more he saw in them the image of Christ.

Our text is a story of choices. Joseph faced his night of terror as well. Faced with the choice of staying where it was comfortable and familiar, or leaving for a strange land and an alien people, he chose the latter. And the Magi, the Magi had to decide whether to return by the same road, or take another. In a story of two kings, we are obligated, are we not, to choose to which we will give our loyalty: Herod or Jesus.

And yet, and yet, the wonder of the story is that the great power of God is a gift given in all the fragility and threat of life. The Christ child faces deadly threat, that can't be avoided, but He and we are given the strength to face them, and walk through them, and get past them to survive into a new and different future.

Not to escape them, but to live through them with the powerful strength and support of His presence. A strength no Herod commands. That's what brings us here today, to hear the message that we are beloved of God, to receive a morsel of bread, and a sip of wine, and to know that we are God's forgiven and beloved people. Matthew will tell us of more and more threats Jesus will face as He grows, until he will face the final threat of all, only to pass through it and to rise to newness of life in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Just before Jesus dies on the cross, we are told of a criminal, who sees Jesus for what he is. The criminal asks not to be excused for his life of crime. The criminal asks not to be forgiven. He asks only that Jesus will remember him when he comes into his kingdom. Surely, beloved, that is our prayer too. It is to that plea that Jesus responds with the astounding message. Today, you shall be with me in paradise. And, they say, they say, that criminal's name was Dismas.

Amen.