

"The Ugly Part"

First Sunday of Christmas
The Reverend Glenn E. Ludwig

8:15 and 11:00 a.m. Sunday, December 26, 2010
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Matthew 2:13-23

In the year when Quirinius was governor of Syria,
and Herod, King of Judea,
Jesus was born of Mary in the town of Bethlehem.
And there was a saying in that land:

"I'd rather be Herod's pig than Herod's child."

For the Jew, it was unlawful to kill any animal with a cloven hoof,
and Herod, sensitive to the Jews, observed this.

But he had killed his own children out of fear that they might usurp his
throne.

So, in the year when Quirinius was governor of Syria,
and Herod, King of Judea,
when Jesus the Christ was born of Mary,
Herod, who cared for his pigs,
had thousands of children murdered in hopes of killing Jesus.

There we have it side by side in Matthew's Gospel:
the beautiful and the ugly.

The beautiful story of Mary and Jesus,
and the ugly incident of Herod's slaughter of the innocents.

And Matthew makes no bones about it:

Chapter One – the birth of Jesus;

Chapter Two – the murder of innocent children.

And so it goes throughout the Bible

and throughout our lives:

the awful contrast between good and bad,

between joy and tragedy,

between the beautiful and the ugly.

But in all of this, the Christian believer sees something a little different,
because the believer sees something different in the life of Jesus.

For us, the figure of Jesus the Christ stands to show us that

God is with us – with us in the ugly parts of life as well as the joyous.

We call him Immanuel -- "God with us" –

God with us in and through it all.

And this is what Matthew is driving at:

not just the mystery of God in the joy of human birth,

but God with us in the bloody unwashed baby's cry breaking the midnight air,

and God with us in the squalor and poverty of our stables and slums,

and God with us amidst the cruelty of men and women,

in the death of friends and loved ones,

and the slaughter of the innocents.

God with us, not beyond the stars,

but underneath the stars;

not beyond his creation,

but entering in, to be with his creation.

But at his birth, this wasn't so apparent,

because what was there really to see?
 There were no advertisements in the sky announcing:
 "God is with us, and will continue to come to us."
 And Mary was in too much pain really to think about it,
 and Joseph was too busy getting hot water to speculate.
 And even as the child grew in wisdom and stature,
 Joseph and Mary reacted like typical parents—
 somewhat baffled at his actions and ideas.
 They knew and they didn't know –
 they felt his uniqueness and felt the responsibility of parenthood.
 When he stayed behind in the temple to question the learned Rabbis,
 amazing them with his insights,
 Joseph and Mary didn't say, "My boy the genius."
 They were upset that he hadn't told them where he was going;
 they worried about his safety, just like all parents of children.
 And when he began his public ministry, they were troubled.
 One time, Mary went to get him with his brothers and sisters,
 and he didn't even seem to acknowledge them,
 saying something like, "All who do the will of my Father
 are my mother and brother and sister."

 But Matthew saw it.
 And soon after Mary saw it.
 And Peter and James and John and Mary of Magdala saw it.
 They saw in his life, and in their own lives,
 that God is with us, really with us, in all of the
 rottenness, injustices, sickness, death, hopelessness and misery –
 in the tough decisions, and in the bitter disappointments.
 He healed them, and they saw it.
 he uplifted them, and they saw it.
 And he hung there, bleeding and suffocating to death, and they saw it.
 Even the Roman soldier saw it,
 when Jesus refused to curse them and spit on them,
 when Jesus gave himself over into God's hands, he saw it,
 and said, "Surely this one was the Son of God."
 And three days later they saw it,
 Oh, how they saw it – so that they cried and wept for joy.
 Mary Magdalene, breaking down in the garden;
 Peter, tough, cynical, beaten Peter, excited as a child.
 For there he was, alive and whole –
 the one who was broken by the ugliness of the cross had risen,
 and they saw God was with them all
 and nothing could defeat them –
 because God's love is and always will be greater
 than any evil, any wrong, any ugliness.

 This is what Matthew realized,
 and what Matthew was driving at even from the beginning of his testimony,
 that God is with us,
 in the beauty of his birth, and in the ugliness of Herod's slaughter.
 And this is what we've come to realize, too, with our eyes and ears of faith,
 that God is with us, with us even now,
 with all of us in the ugly parts of our lives,
 as well as the good and joyous parts.

What Christ revealed by his birth, life, death and resurrection
was something that is eternally true:
that God, our God, enters in with us into the deepest
and most painful parts of life:
the ugliness of a family fight, as well as in the beauty of worship;
the ugliness of childhood disease, as well as the beauty of a Sunday
School Christmas program;
the ugliness of our loneliness and sickness and deaths, as well as
the beauty of our family reunions and happy times together.
And we've come to realize this in even deeper ways—
in ways that only the soul can know in times of deep trouble:
in lonely hours alone when our thoughts turn dark and ominous,
in broken hours when no human voice speaks any word of comfort.

During the height of the second World War,
England had feared for the safety of King George VI,
and had urged him and his family to go to Canada.
But George refused, wanting to stay with his people.
One day, as he was walking in the rubble after an air-raid,
he saw an old gardener trying to save a young tree.
And he said to the gardener,
"You are a good people."
And the gardener looking up, recognized the King,
and replied with tears in his eyes,
"But you, Sir, are a good King."

That sums it up for me:
What Christmas is all about;
what Jesus the Christ is all about;
what God is all about –
God with us – in and through all the parts of our lives.

Our fancy theological word is "incarnation,"
the in-the-fleshness of our God.
And what it really means is that
God is with us,
amidst the rubble of our broken dreams;
amidst the ruin of our tangled lives;
in the economic pressures and tough decisions;
in all the sad memories and bleak, cold days.
And whether Quirinius is governor of Syria,
or madmen roam this earth with plans created by sick minds and fueled by hatred,
God is with us,
not to take away the ugly parts,
but to make them bearable,
for the heart that reaches out to him;
for us this day and all days.

Amen.

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