

Kaye was talking with a friend about the effect of the trip on her, especially the suffering of the children. Her friend very perceptively said that it sounded like her heart had been broken. And it is true. We all, at one time or another, have our hearts broken. Some of us live with broken hearts and have not acknowledged it, wounds and hurts that we have buried. We see them as a sign of weakness, so we try to ignore them and our hurt comes out in other ways—anger, depression, self-hate, distancing ourselves from people and life. However, the message of the escape of Jesus and his family, and the slaughter of the innocent children, is about broken hearts. The message about Jesus as the pioneer of our salvation, our wholeness, through suffering is about the importance of broken hearts. My sister Carol wrote a poem when she was in high school. It has always been my favorite of her poems. The last line is: “Let my heart be broken by the things that would break the heart of God.” Only out of broken hearts can we become people of compassion, peace, justice, and, oddly enough, the deepest kind of joy.

I realized at the end of our trip that I was anxious to get back home and to the things we are working with here, for me personally the two missions I have felt called to—our retreat center, a place of refuge, rest, and renewal for people getting and staying in touch with their own hearts, and the Festival Center, a place of safety, peace, and community in the inner city. But also all the things we are involved in and giving ourselves to in order to transform suffering into new life. In India we visited many places and programs that were full of the light of love and compassion and justice. I realized how important it is that there are communities of people who are living into their brotherhood and sisterhood with Jesus, who acknowledge their own and others’ struggles and suffering, and are growing into a fuller humanity embodying God’s word of love. Communities that live out of broken hearts. Communities like ours here.

That’s what incarnation is about. God’s love fully dwelling in the life of Jesus Christ. His faithfulness to that indwelling word and love through his sufferings. And our following him as the pioneer of our salvation, our wholeness, who leads us into and through our suffering so that we become a healing people.

December 30, 2007/First Sunday after Christmas/David L. Edwards

Jesus: Pioneer of Our Faith

Hebrews 2:10-13, 17-18

Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.

Matthew 2:13-23

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....

The story of the Holy Family’s escape from Herod’s wrath is disturbing. God rescues the infant Jesus from impending violence. That fits with the reading from Isaiah, which speaks of God’s saving presence with us. But just as we breathe a sigh of relief as Jesus’ life is spared, we are horrified as Herod’s troops slaughter innocent children. It is the desperate and murderous act of a political leader protecting his power at the cost of human life.

Here is a reminder of realities in our world. The lives of children are expendable in the path of political and economic power bent on its own ends. To protect the wealth of health insurance corporations, 9 million children in our society still go without health care. To further the ends of political ambitiousness, that of our own country and others, children become collateral damage in our wars. An economy built on unnecessary wants and on greed targets children as consumers.

Three weeks ago, as we walked back to our bus from touring of the Taj Mahal in Agra, India, impoverished children, some physically disabled, pressed in on us to sell us trinkets or to beg for money. In Delhi, a young girl danced for handouts on the median of the traffic-choked street, while her mother and a younger child watched nearby. Children who have lost their childhood. Children who should be in school and whose families should be made able to care for them. Children who need to be held, nurtured, protected. The week after our return, I read an article in the New York Times about the booming economic opportunities in India and how European and American companies are climbing aboard what the writer called a bus that was surely on the move, but without anyone knowing where it was going. From all indications, the economic boom in India will continue to benefit primarily the tiny minority of those who are already wealthy. The answer to the suffering of the poor will need to come from another place, a deeper source than the present structures and values of political and economic power.

These are not your typical Christmastime thoughts. I’m afraid that the Christmas season as it is celebrated in our culture is mostly a time of avoidance of and

escape from the realities of suffering, our own and that of the larger human family. The way we normally observe Christmas sadly misses the truly good news. The life of Jesus has to do with our real struggles and sufferings as human beings. Not a flight into some imagined time or place where there is no suffering, but the truly good news of God's being present with us in a way that transforms our suffering into something else. What we need most is a word that speaks to us of God's presence with us in the very things that cause us suffering. What we need is a word that speaks to us of how we can live so that we embrace the difficult and painful things we face as individuals or a human family, embrace them so that we find something life giving in them, even overcome them.

It is important that we have this painful story of Herod's slaughter of the children right in the midst of our celebration of Christ's birth. It speaks of the real experiences we face. It is also important that we have the passage from the Letter to the Hebrews. It pictures Jesus as the "pioneer of our salvation (or wholeness) made perfect (or complete) through suffering," a human being like us who lived with such unbroken intimacy with God that he becomes for us the way, the truth, the life. He is the one who goes before us, blazing the trail, pioneering the way of living as a true human being. The passage emphasizes again and again Jesus' oneness with us. We have the "same Father" as Jesus. He is not ashamed to call us brothers and sisters. He was like us in every respect, facing all the struggles and sufferings we face, in order to open up the way for us to follow. It is a path into and through suffering, not around or away from it. It is a way that embraces our suffering.

It is common at this time of year to speak of God's incarnation in Jesus, God becoming a human being. Actually, scripture itself never speaks that way. In his gospel, John speaks of "the word become flesh," not God becoming flesh. The "word" is God's living, powerful energy and truth, and Jesus fully embodies—incarnates—that word. The problem, which the church has debated for centuries, is that if Jesus is God incarnate, then that makes him so different from us that we lose our connection with him. And that is NOT what the writer of Hebrews is saying. Jesus is one of us, a human being, a brother. The power of his life for us is that he so fully embodied the life of faith and faithfulness, encountered all the things we face and more, and nevertheless kept faithfulness. His sufferings were as a human being like us, yet one who was able to face and embrace those sufferings in utter trust in God. That is why he opened the way for us to follow, to live the same way, to discover and embody the same life of faith. That faith, that life is able to transcend the fear of death, to take great risks for the sake of compassion and love, and to discover in ever-deepening ways what life is really about.

Following Jesus as the pioneer of our faith is not a path of avoidance of suffering or difficulty. Sometimes it takes us right into trouble! It is not a primrose path leading to a pain-free life. It is not a leaping over of the difficulties and challenges

of this life as we look to a life beyond. And it is certainly not a path of prosperity, a popular message these days in some churches. The life of following Jesus leads us to our own lives and their struggles, our own difficulties and the challenges they bring us—physical, emotional, spiritual. And it is a path that leads us to awareness of the sufferings of others, so that we feel God's call and discern the gifts God gives us to respond in life-giving ways. What is truly hopeful in the message and life of Jesus is a spiritual path that enables us to embrace the painful experiences of life and discover in them transformative power, what scripture calls the power of resurrection, of new life.

This is why we talk so much here about the importance of being on an inward journey. It is a journey of growing awareness and understanding of our own lives, beginning with an acceptance of our lives rooted in God's grace and love toward us. Making a decision to be on our own inward journey means that we stop running from the things that scare us, that hurt us, that cause us and others pain because they are un-faced and un-dealt with. When we begin to stop, quiet ourselves, and inwardly listen and look, we are already taking the first step in overcoming our suffering. It begins with awareness, acceptance, and self-understanding.

When we experience something that is painful—a death, a broken relationship, a loss of some kind—we want to run from it, dull the pain, find a way of somehow jumping over it into a place where things are like they were before or like we want them to be, carefree and without suffering. But having a spiritual practice that enables us to sit, to be with the thoughts and feelings, to embrace them in compassion, helps us to begin to experience the presence of God IN our suffering and to know Christ as our brother and as the pioneer of our faith who leads us through the difficulties of our lives.

There is also an outward journey, our response to suffering and the things that diminish life. As we become more human in the way Christ was human, embracing and not denying or running from our suffering, we become more open and compassionate people. We become aware of the sufferings and struggles of others, see them as brothers and sisters, and begin to discern what God might be calling us to do in response. Also we begin to discern the gifts God has given us to share for the healing of life. Jesus' response to suffering, his own and others', was to embrace it as part of life and to respond to it with God's own love and compassion.

The last days of our India trip were particularly hard. It wasn't just seeing the extent of human suffering or the human-caused suffering of the earth in the thickly-polluted air of Delhi and other cities. I became aware that we were riding through the streets of India's cities looking through windows at the suffering of people. Or we were strangers anxiously just trying to navigate sidewalks crowded with poor people pressing in on us for money. To give to one meant opening a floodgate that we could not fill even if we emptied our wallets and pockets.