

December 26, 2010/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. Just as we breathe a sigh of relief as Jesus' life is spared, we are horrified as Herod's soldiers slaughter innocent children. The story echoes the birth of Moses in Egypt, and the similar response of Pharaoh. It is the preemptive, murderous act of political leaders of any time and any nation, protecting their power, flexing their military muscles.

This story plants our feet firmly within the realities in our world. It is not the stuff of Christmas cards, but of events happening throughout the world, wherever political interests, backed up by armies, are exerting themselves, including our own. The lives of children are expendable in the face of political and economic power. To protect the profits of health insurance corporations, millions of children in our society still go without health care, and efforts to extend health care to them remain under attack. Children are "collateral damage" in our wars, a fact about which neither our politicians nor military leaders will speak. An economy built on unnecessary wants and on greed targets children as consumers. The spirit of Herod is still present and strong.

These are not the Christmastime thoughts we would prefer. I'm afraid that the Christmas season as it is celebrated in our culture is mostly an avoidance of and escape from the realities of suffering, our own and that of the human family. The way we observe Christmas actually obscures the truly good news. The life of Jesus, including the stories of his birth, has to do with our real struggles and sufferings as human beings. It is the truly good news of God's being present with us in a way that leads us through and undermines the causes of suffering. The Christmas gospel speaks to us of God's presence with us, and how we can live in ways contrary to the mentalities and forces that inflict suffering on children and all vulnerable human beings. The Christmas good news calls us to the counter-cultural path of nonviolence, justice and compassion, and knowing the truth that God's kingdom, God's realm, the way life is created to be, belongs to children. They hold the keys to it. That's what Jesus taught. And when we stay close to children, making their needs our priority, then we will learn and live what life is really about.

It is important that we have this disturbing 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 tells us that God cannot stop the Herods of this world, bent as they are on ambition and self-protective violence. Yet God is creating, and has created, another way, a life giving way. It is the true way of life, and we are called to it. It is our true journey, and our true home.

So 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 repeatedly emphasizes 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.

At this time of year we speak of God's incarnation in Jesus, God becoming a human being. Actually, scripture itself never talks that way. The closest to it is in John's gospel, where the writer speaks of "the word become flesh," not God becoming flesh. The "word" is God's powerful energy and truth, and Jesus fully embodies—incarnates—that divine energy and truth and light. The problem with the way the church has usually spoken of the incarnation is this: 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 yet kept faithfulness. His sufferings were as a human being like us, yet one who was able to face and embrace those sufferings with 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 the realities of our lives, but through them. 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 the way Superman leaps over tall buildings. And it has nothing to do with the prosperity hawked by so many mega churches today. The life of following Jesus leads us to our own lives and whatever struggles, difficulties, and challenges they bring us. 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 the inward journey of our lives is so crucial. It is our growing awareness and understanding of our own lives. It is the daily grounding our lives in God's grace and love toward us. Making a decision to be on our own inward journey means that we can 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. Having a spiritual practice that enables us to be with difficult experiences and to embrace them in compassion enables us also 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.

When we returned from our trip to India three years ago, Kaye was talking with a friend about the effect of the trip on her, especially the suffering of the children. We had seen it everywhere, and in enormous proportions, surrounded by indifference. Yet we had also seen what can be done when people honor children and their needs. Kaye's friend very perceptively said that it sounded like her heart had been broken. And it was true. We all, at one time or another, have our hearts broken. I am wondering if the story of Jesus' escape and Herod's brutality against children is meant to break our 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." Having broken hearts means we see the reality of suffering, our own and others'. And with broken hearts can we be people who see and reject the way of Herod. We choose the way of compassion, peace, justice, and, oddly enough, the deepest kind of joy.

That's what incarnation is about. God's love and truth fully dwelling in the life of Jesus Christ. His faithfulness to that indwelling word and love through his sufferings. His call to and empowering of us to follow him as the pioneer of our salvation, the one who has gone and goes before us, leading the way to our own wholeness and to living in ways that bring wholeness to the world..