



Pastor Ken Nelson's Sermon

NEW YEAR'S DAY

JANUARY 1, 2023

"THE REST OF THE (CHRISTMAS) STORY"

The great radio personality Paul Harvey was famous for signing off his broadcasts by saying "*and now you've heard ... the rest of the story.*" Today we get "*the rest of the Christmas story*", and it's not the sort of feel good ending Mr. Harvey was famous for in his radio tales. Matthew gives us a hard story today - not so much hard to believe as hard to accept. That violence claims innocents in this world is not news... that the child Jesus was an intended target not hard to fathom either. That he escaped when others didn't however is. Of course, it does us little good to speculate about what if Herod's soldiers had found Jesus - they didn't.

Yet it's the kind of story that gives people fits. Many today are critical of Christianity - they feel it's naïve and aloof to suffering - that our faith is simply soft optimism that one day, as the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote, "*the wrong shall fail and right prevail with peace on earth, goodwill to men.*" That we don't roll up our sleeves enough and confront evil in the world - a criticism not always unwarranted by the way. There is nothing wrong with faith seeking answers, but faith cannot rest on them - or it's not faith, and what we cling to not hope.

I remember once listening to an interview on CNN with a man from India, whose wife was a passenger on the Malaysian Airlines flight that simply vanished over the Indian ocean, and to this day has not been found. He was asked if after three weeks of searching he held out any hope the plane would be found, and his wife might still be alive. He replied quite tersely "*I have no use for hope in my life - I am swayed only by facts and reason.*"

When such folks hear the Christmas story that speaks of "*good news of great joy to all on whom God's favor rests*", they're un-swayed- for if you have no room for hope in your life, you probably have little room for joy either. Joy emanates out of anticipation and conviction of things unseen. Joy lives beyond the moment, it abides through times and events that are sad, even tragic, believing against all appearances that Longfellow was correct - right shall prevail, wrong will fail and there will be peace and goodwill among us one day.

But Matthew let the sad, shocking report of the holy innocents form "the rest of our Lord's nativity story." I believe in so doing he renders powerless any accusation that Christianity is "naïve" - soft optimism. We know how the world is - it's part of our sacred story. Even when Luke ends his Christmas story saying the child Jesus was presented in the temple on the 40th day of his life, his parents met a man named Simeon who was filled with joy at seeing the child and blessed him, and Jesus returned with his parents to Nazareth in Galilee with no mention of Herod or a flight to Egypt whatsoever, there is a note of sobriety.

But Simeon, in his otherwise effusive blessing of the child, said Jesus was destined to be the rising and falling of many in Israel, to be a sign that was opposed, and that Mary's heart would be pierced by those whose "thoughts" were revealed by her child. Simeon knows what Matthew reports - Jesus reveals the truth about us. Herod was among the first whose "*thoughts were revealed*" and they were not pleasant ones.

Yet, can any of us say there is not a shadow of Herod within us? Writer Emelie Griffin said *"Are we people of forgiveness and goodwill? When something or someone gets in my way, do I strike out, using imperious demands? Do I seek power for myself more than reconciliation with others?"* Martin Luther said the discordant part of Simeon's blessing was spoken only so that we should not despair of Christ and the gospel when it is opposed. If it had not been foretold, Luther wrote, it would be almost unbearable. It ought to be unbearable for us when people fall away or never come to faith- but equally so when disputes among us divide and inattentiveness to the importance of the body of Christ persists among us who remain.

And though repulsed by the violent actions of Herod, Luther simply took his murderous rampage as the tragic but logical extension of how Christ is disregarded by so many in the world - precisely because, Luther said, Jesus exposes our hearts. Luther in his day was dismayed by many in the church who seemed to pay more attention to the maintenance of their altars and buildings than their baptisms - and, drawing from the example of Herod - albeit at a much different level - how the Christ child is regarded and sadly "disregarded" in this world.

By telling us "the rest of the story" of Christmas, Matthew and Luke demonstrate that Christianity is anything but naive about our world yet is nevertheless uniquely brimming with hope for that world. On Christmas night angels echoed words from the prophet Isaiah that God, despite Israel's unfaithfulness, was their Savior...and *"in all their affliction, God was afflicted."*

Nothing describes Jesus more than those few words - as we are afflicted, Jesus is afflicted. Isaiah 53:4-5 said *"surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows ... he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities, the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed."* Jesus came to heal, save, and give you peace with God. But he first came to reveal your heart - not to God, who already knows, nor to others ... we do a pretty good job of that on our own... but to you, to reveal your thoughts - the secrets selves we keep under lock and key - the shadows of Herod that live within us. So we are not naive - we're not given that option, but we are hopeful. II Corinthians 5:17 says *"If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, the old has passed, behold the new has come."*

Jesus did that for you - gave you a clean heart, renewed a right spirit within you. And the dreadfully difficult, painful story of the innocents reveals just what an enormous task that was for God to accomplish. Herod, the first of many hearts to have its thoughts revealed by Jesus, shows what we can be. But you are in Christ. You love Jesus because he first loved you ... the transforming power of the gospel is in you. You are not naive about the world, nor your own sinfulness. You are a Christian - a holy innocent through of the blood of Jesus. That is the rest of the story. AMEN