

December 30, 2007

Matthew 2:13-23

Dr. W. Glen Bell

“After Christmas: Fleeing and Fulfillment”

It's all over . . . or is it?

The gifts have all been unwrapped and the paper and ribbons are out with the trash.

The turkey was wonderfully delicious, but we're getting a bit tired of leftovers and the old bird is getting dry and stringy.

The needles on the tree are showering the floor and it is almost time to throw it out.

Christmas – is it over?

To tell the truth, some of us are quite relieved to think that it's finished. Only three and one-half weeks ago, about ten days after Thanksgiving, one of the servant leaders of our congregation stopped by my study and mentioned that her family had just put up their Christmas tree. Then she quietly exclaimed: “I cannot wait for it to come down!”

Every December many of us wonder: When will it all be over? For, added to the normal pace of our busy, everyday lives are homes to decorate, parties to host, cookies to bake, presents to purchase and extended family to welcome for dinner.

Oh, all the images of Christmas are clear and pervasive – a silent night with the hush of the Holy Family gathered by the manger, the songs of the season that proclaim the grand celebration of love and joy, the movies that remind us every December that Christmas is the time of year for warm hugs for everyone.

But for some of our friends and co-workers – and even for some of us – the season seemed to end even before it began. For the southern Californians, who lost everything in the recent wildfires. For the mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, husbands and wives of the more than 4,500 American soldiers who have died in Iraq and Afghanistan. For those devastated by flood in Mexico, for the poor of Somalia and Congo, for the vulnerable orphans and children of Kenya, for the hungry and the homeless of Indianapolis. For those, this Christmas, who find themselves in a local hospital – or a funeral home.

It's all over, isn't it?

Ironically, that is exactly the kind of question we might expect Mary and Joseph to be asking. Both had been faithful through the trials of the last months. Mary had endured the questions and the scorn of those who questioned that her child was from the Holy Spirit. Joseph had done as the angel commanded, sticking by Mary even when friends and family could only struggle to understand. And so the baby Jesus was born, foretold by scripture, recognized by angels, lauded with gifts by wise men from the East.

Just after we have sung “*O Little Town of Bethlehem*” and “*O Come, All Ye Faithful*,” the story takes a dark and treacherous turn. “Get up!” the angel commands. “Take the child and flee to Egypt, for Herod the king is coming to destroy him.” Joseph and Mary, tired and worn from all the events surrounding the birth of Jesus, flee from their home in the middle of the night.

But their escape cannot save the other children. In a fury, Herod has all the babies in and around Bethlehem executed. And a curtain of darkness is drawn across the scene, as mother after mother cries for the infants, the Holy Innocents, “Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled because they are no more.”

It's all over or is it?

How shocking – yet how realistic – that the experience of the very first Christmas is followed by fear and fleeing, death and destruction.

Don DeLillo has recently published *Falling Man*, a novel of September 11, 2001. His story begins the day of the disaster as the main character flees from the twin towers: “It was not a street anymore but a . . . time and space of falling ash and near night. He was walking north through rubble . . . He wore a suit and carried a briefcase [a strange briefcase]. There was glass in his hair and face. . . . He walked slowly, watching for something he could not identify.”

On his way down the stairs, he had picked up a briefcase, not his own...just a random briefcase. For some reason, beyond his understanding, beyond any understanding, he carried the briefcase all the way down hundreds of steps and through the streets of lower Manhattan.

Days later, he finally locates the owner of the briefcase, a stranger to him, someone he has never met before. He returns the case to her and they both realize that small act, that seemingly random act, carries far more weight than either can understand.

“You saved my life,” she says. “I can't explain it, but you saved my life . . . I kept calling the number of a friend, missing . . . I can barely say her name. I was afraid other people would be there to pick up the phone . . . Then you walked in the door. You ask yourself why you took the briefcase out of the building? That's why you took it . . . to keep me alive.”

Amid smoke and ash and death it all seemed over, but surprisingly, amazingly, life and hope continued.

How shocking – yet how realistic – that fear and fleeing, death and destruction, are followed by life and hope.

The verbs and the adjectives of this morning's scripture lesson are harsh and uncompromising: “Get up and flee.” “Search and destroy.” “Tricked and infuriated.” “Sent and killed.” “Weeping and wailing.” “Refusing to be consoled.” “Afraid and warned in a dream.”

But at every turn, like hope in the night, like light in the darkness, we hear this quiet refrain: “This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord”

God works amid darkness and light. God works even through the wrenching difficulties faced by Mary and Joseph and the unspeakable pain of the families of Bethlehem. God works even in the hunger and homelessness, the injustice and abuse of our city and our world this week.

Fulfillment, you see, is not the self-actualization of which Abraham Maslow once spoke, nor that moment of fantasy when our gifts under the tree are endless, answering our every whim and desire. No, fulfillment comes in the strangest of ways, for the Holy Family and for us. We suspect it occurs when the gifts are unwrapped and the turkey is sliced and the family is all present; we suspect it comes when we finally finish, when we settle in, when we celebrate. But, like Joseph and Mary, we discover that fulfillment truly arrives when we faithfully walk the path set before us, in darkness and light, through thick and thin.

Viktor Frankl, the psychotherapist who survived the concentration camps of Nazi Germany, puts it this way: “Everyone has their own specific vocation or mission in life; everyone must carry out a concrete assignment that demands fulfillment. Everyone's task is as unique as their specific opportunity.”

Two weeks ago I had the privilege of working very briefly on behalf of a woman who needed help for herself and her two children. She was behind in her bills and her electricity had just been turned off by the power company. Thankfully, we

were able to point her to some assistance. A week later, I was thrilled to receive a phone call from her, letting us know the electricity had been reconnected. She called back simply to thank us – all of us – for the assistance of our congregation.

Her vocation, you see, was not just to fight for the best for her son and daughter, but also to give thanks for the help of the church. She was fulfilled not simply because things improved for her and her family, but because she could experience and express the goodness of gratitude.

How is it for you and me this year after Christmas? Is it all over?

Does this story of Mary and Joseph seem to be a God-given nightmare, one in which the moral is that being next to the Holy is dangerous?

Or can we see that carrying that tiny baby, even into exile, was the greatest privilege a person could ever imagine?

Anna Carter Florence, who teaches at Columbia Theological Seminary, puts it this way: “What are we to do with a story like this, especially in a week like this? People are Christmas-drunk. They are stuffed to the eyeballs with sugarplums and sick of the taste. The relatives aren’t leaving until next Tuesday. The kids are home from school for another week. You have six gifts to return to five stores. The house is a wreck, the world is a mess and we’re supposed to be singing Christmas carols? Please!

“[But] maybe this story is exactly what we need in a week like this. Maybe what we really need is to simply hear what happened.

“Jesus wasn’t born because your home is Christmas-picture perfect. He was born because your house is a wreck and your home is a mess. He was born, and right away a lot of children in Bethlehem died. Because let’s get something straight: liberation costs something. Grace isn’t cheap. The rulers of this world do not want us to believe that God’s love is more powerful than their might. The rulers of this world do not want us to put our faith in unconditional love. They want us to be afraid, very afraid. So they stalk the streets of Bethlehem, they invite us to their palaces, and they hope we will forget to tell this story to one another. They hope we will forget what we are truly up against, and what Jesus’ birth sets in motion.”

If we can somehow glimpse that truth, we will recognize anew that Christmas doesn’t end when the gifts are unwrapped and the turkey is cold, when the ornaments are boxed away and the children and grandchildren have gone back home.

It isn’t over, for Christ’s birth sets a whole new world in motion, a kingdom of heaven that breaks into every dim corner, every hidden injustice of our world.

It isn’t over, for our lives find fulfillment as we carry the Light of the world out into the darkness, into homes of hunger and heartbreak, into the places of mourning and loss, lighting the face of evil and power which would laugh at the feeble flame that we carry.

And mystery of mysteries, as we carry the Light and proclaim God’s peace and speak out against injustice and offer our very best in Christ’s name, we discover somehow that as we embrace others, we too are held like the Christ child, that as we carry the Light, we too are carried like the infant Jesus and that our losses and pain are wrapped within the mantle of God’s healing grace.

We discover, beyond any expectation and any human hope, that Christmas is not over, never over, and that our fulfillment comes as we work and wait and wonder, in the name of Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.