**Christmas—The Next Day—Matthew 2: 13-23**

*(December 29, 2019—1st Sunday after Christmas)*

*(This reflection relies extensively on the work of Nadia Bolz-Weber. It is an adaption of her sermon, “Fear vs Love: a Sermon about 2 Different Kinds of Men*.*”*  *It can be found at* [*https://www.patheos.com/blogs/nadiabolzweber?s=matthew+2*](https://www.patheos.com/blogs/nadiabolzweber?s=matthew+2)*)*

To coin a common phrase these days, “Well, that escalated quickly”. It was just five days ago we celebrated birth, love, vulnerability and grace. Here we are today confronted with fear, mass murder and the refugee Jesus. We don’t like this Christmas story. Not as many of us here today as there were on Christmas Eve.[[1]](#footnote-1) This is the story of 2 men. Herod, who is a ruler on a throne of power, and Joseph who is a peasant in an unconventional marriage. One man is powerful and one man is not. Our faith story describes one of these men as being afraid, surprisingly it wasn’t the peasant.

Matthew’s Gospel tells us that King Herod made the magi tell him where this baby was because he was frightened. Frightened of a baby. Threatened by a horoscope and a newborn. Threatened by this distant relative of King David. And this fear, this fear that his position in life is so tenuous that it must be fortified by sacrificing whoever it takes – which is not a theory by the way, Herod literally killed two of his own sons because he felt threatened by them. His own sons. Fear that what he had could be taken away, or fear of not getting what he wanted turned him into a murderous monster. So much so that when he can’t quite locate the right baby, the one that is so threatening to him, he just sends for all the children 2 and under in and around Bethlehem to be killed. Take that in. This is what fear does. What is more threatening to the vulnerable than a world leader with a fragile ego and a lot of power? I guess we know about that to. The harsh reality of our sinfulness is that if God’s love makes an appearance in the flesh there is going to be pain and often times blood as well. If our allegiances to our fears and egos are to be de-throned, it will not be pretty.[[2]](#footnote-2)

This is what fear does. Fear disguises itself in so many ways: as greed, hate, isolation, addiction…the list is endless. But in the end fear is at the root of all of it. And while you and I might not be murderous tyrants, none of us are free from the effects of fear in our lives. It keeps us isolated and small and it steals away possibility.

But in Joseph we see a different kind of man than Herod. Joseph was not afraid. An angel came from God and spoke love, was love, embodied love, sought to protect love – like a divine can of compressed air, and this cast out Joseph’s fear so that he could function the way he was intended to. And here’s one clue – one way that we can know that Joseph was not afraid: he didn’t bat an eye when the angel said that his baby and wife weren’t safe so he should take his family to Egypt. Egypt. The place his ancestors were enslaved. The place that God rescued his people from slavery. With fear cast out, Joseph was able to believe it possible that God’s redemptive work can happen anywhere – even Egypt. With fear cast out, Joseph no longer had to see everything through the lens of what it was in the past. With fear cast out, he was able to beat a king, protect his wife and child, and preserve that which is good in the face of tyranny.

Herod’s fear caused death and Joseph’s fearlessness protected life. Of course the irony is that Herod feared this baby for all the wrong reasons. The Christ child did not knock Herod off his pathetic little throne. History took care of that. No. As this child grew he knew he had a different allegiance. Jesus of Nazareth did not overthrow Rome, he laughed at Rome. He saw Rome for what it was: temporary. Fleeting. Harsh and demanding and tyrannical, yes, but temporary.

And this child, protected by the songs of angels and the heart of his mother and the fearlessness of his father, came to free the people. Free us from the shackles of fear and sin. Sin is separation from God and Jesus bridges that gap for us, shows us what communion with God looks like. Gospel people are free people and free people are dangerous people. Free people can’t be easily controlled. Free people laugh more than others. Free people see beauty where others do not. Free people see Rome and it’s pettiness for what it is. Free people’s only allegiance is to Love. That’s our call, to allow the Holy One to take on our flesh and live freely.

It won’t always be easy or pretty. It will often be lonely and de-moralizing. Freedom has a price in a world hell bent on enslaving us. Martin Luther King Jr. speaking also about the slaughter of innocent children, four black girls in a church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama, an act similarly driven by fear, the fear that drives the hatred of racism said this, "At times, life is hard, as hard as crucible steel…Never forget that God is able to lift you from the fatigue of despair to the buoyancy of hope, and transform dark and desolate valleys into sunlit paths of inner peace."[[3]](#footnote-3) That’s the hope for those with eyes of faith, to acknowledge and to see clearly pain and injustice but see even more clearly and to live in the freedom of what God is doing and where God is calling in the midst of it all. People of faith hold fast to a defiant love, a love that will not be subsumed by the pathetic machinations of those driven by fear. People of faith hold fast to a defiant, vulnerable love that continuously throughout the ages calls us to wholeness, to a state of right relationship with ourselves, others, creation and the Holy One.

This love is relentless, outlasting any temporal, pathetic grasp at power. In the heart of God there is enough love to cast out fear. It is from this heart we come and to this heart we return and it beats around us and is shown in the shimmering love that absolutely covers this world. There is enough love to cast out our fear. And it’s everywhere. Herods of the world, *take note.*

1. William Willimon, *Blood in Bethlehem****,*** <https://repository.duke.edu/dc/dukechapel/dcrst003557>, preached on December 27, 1998. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Willimon [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Martin Luther King Jr., *Eulogy for Martyred Children*, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/eulogy-martyred-children>. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)