

The Down Side of Christmas

Matthew 2:13-18

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'Twas the day after Christmas  
When all through the place  
There were arguments and depression—  
Even mom had a long face.

The stockings hung empty;  
And the house was a mess.  
The clothes didn't fit;  
Dad was under stress.

The family was irritable;  
The children were not pleased.  
The instructions for the swing set  
Were written in Chinese.

The bells no longer jingled;  
And no carolers came around.  
The sink was stacked with dishes;  
And the tree was turning brown.

The stores were full of people  
Returning things that failed.  
And shoppers were discouraged;  
Earlier purchases were now on sale.

'Twas the day after Christmas;

Joy had disappeared.  
The only hope on the horizon  
Were Bowl games on New Year's.

Welcome to worship on the day after Christmas. The malls may be busy today, but we need no overflow seating in houses of worship. So I want to seize this moment to talk about the “down-side of Christmas.”

When Luke tells the story of Christmas he puts six scenes in the operetta, concluding with the blessing of Jesus in the temple by the old prophet Simeon. There is a song in the air. There is joy in the room. It all comes to a nice conclusion when Luke tells the story. That is not so when Matthew tells the story. We get only twelve verses into the text and find the Holy Family on the run trying to escape Herod's massacre of the innocents. Before we can leave Bethlehem our noses are rubbed in politics and pain, blood and sorrow, jealousy and murder. Two nights ago all was calm; all was bright, in the warm, soft, glow of candlelight. Today we hear the cry of the children and the wail of Rachel, the ancient mother of Israel who refuses to be comforted even from her grave. Are there any lessons to be learned from this sobering story, this angry outburst of rage from a king that has been repeated millions of times throughout history?

### **EVIL HAPPENS**

One of our most popular Christmas stories is Dr. Seuss' tale about The Day the Grinch Stole Christmas. Just north of Who-ville lived the Grinch, who hated Christmas—maybe his shoes were too tight, maybe his head was not screwed on right, most likely his heart was just two sizes too small. Whatever the reason, the Grinch, under the guise of Santa, steals all the presents, swipes all the decorations, and stops bells from ringing in hopes of keeping people from singing. **Evil** is **live** spelled backwards. Wherever there is hope and good will, wherever people gather in good cheer, wherever there is a life force among us, there are reversals at work. We can't even get away from it in our children's

stories. We have to warn our children when they are yet young that evil is all around us. Even the Grinch comes to steal Christmas.

Hate is strong. Bitterness is real. Greed is rampant. Terror plays havoc with our ordered ways. When the hosts of evil strike us, those who suffer the most seem to be the children. Just to put it in perspective, Herod's slaughter of the innocents in Matthew's gospel probably involved about 25-40 boys two years of age or younger.

In Jerusalem some years ago, I visited the Holocaust Museum. There I walked through a dark tunnel where one by one, day after day, the names of millions of children who died in Hitler's ovens are spoken. An eerie silence fills the place. Then, I stepped into a room with a six-foot high stack of children's shoes gathered from those days. I am not a Jew and it was more than I could bear. Is there no mercy for the children of the world?

I picked up the *Tennessean* yesterday morning to see a beautiful, color candlelit view of this Sanctuary on the front page. "What a nice way to begin Christmas," I thought. Then I opened the paper to be confronted with the headlines that "five million orphans inhabit Ethiopia—their parents lost to famine, disease, war, and AIDS." The catastrophe is "tearing apart the social fabric of our nation," say national leaders. Caring for orphans costs \$115 million a month in a country whose annual health budget is only \$140 million."

Then I realize that even in our country, the most blessed nation on earth, 20% of our children live in poverty. Abuse of children, particularly through the Internet has become a national problem. How can we keep from hearing the cry of the children? Is there not good reason to weep with Rachel and not be comforted over that which would destroy the most innocent that live among us? Evil happens.

**GOD HELPS**

*“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in time of trouble”* (Psalm 46:1). Let me be perfectly clear. It is not the will of God that children suffer. It is not the design of God for children to be neglected. It breaks the heart of God that any child should fail to receive the good gifts of loving parents, positive opportunities, and unconditional acceptance. **If you want to know the will of God, God’s will for us is good.** God is not the source of our pain and neither will he abandon us to our pain. In Isaiah 49:15 we read: *“Even if a mother should forsake her child, I will not forsake you.”*

How does God help us in time of trouble? How is it that God helps us with the danger of the day? We can RUN. The angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said—Get up. Take the child. Escape to Egypt. Stay there. The imperatives convey the emergency. Like the Kenny Rogers song says: *You’ve got to know when to hold ’em, know when to fold ’em, know when to walk away and know when to run.* We will do whatever we need to do to keep our children safe and protected from the evil ones, including locking the doors to our day school and child care center. In certain present dangers, the best thing we can do is run for our lives.

How can God help us in time of trouble? There is another thing we can do and that is HOPE. God is forever filling us with hope, which is at the core of Christian faith. It was Christmas 1863. The Civil War was in full swing. The battle of Gettysburg was not more than six months past. In this war-torn country of ours, where brother was killing brother and fathers were fighting sons, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, a legend in his own time wrote:

**“I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day”**

And in despair I bowed my head,  
There is no place on earth, I said  
For hate is strong and mocks the song  
Of peace on earth, good will to men.

But not even Henry Wadsworth Longfellow could stop there. He had to write another verse of it.

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep  
God is not dead nor doth he sleep  
The wrong shall fail, the right prevail  
With peace on earth, good will to men.  
That is our hope. We live as people of hope. Don't ever forget it.

How can God help us in time of trouble? God helps us REMEMBER. I live by a principle that no trouble enjoys everlasting life. I believe that with all my heart.

During WWII, Hitler was making a speech to a large audience. On the front row was a man of pronounced Semitic appearance. He seemed to be smiling. It made Hitler furious. Hitler approached him after his speech and asked, "Were you making fun of my speech?" "No sir, I was not laughing; I was thinking. I was thinking about my people, the Jews whom you deeply hate. Centuries ago there was another man who hated us deeply, an Egyptian Pharaoh. He made us slaves, but in God's time Moses came and set us free. Every year we celebrate the Passover and eat a little three-cornered cake in remembrance of Pharaoh and our deliverance from him.

"Centuries later another man hated us—Haman—you can read about him in the Bible in the book of Esther. He wanted to get rid of us but he wound up hanging on the gallows he made for us. Every year we have another feast. It is called Purim and every year we eat a little four-cornered cake in memory of Haman and that we were set free. As you were speaking, sir, I was just wondering what kind of cake we would be eating in remembrance of you when your time of terror has ended." In the midst of evil, God helps! Let us never forget it.

### **DECISIONS MATTER**

The actions we take shape the future. What if the Magi had reported back to Herod? What if Joseph had not followed his dream? What if our forefathers and mothers had resigned to the evils that threatened to undo them? What if those

who lived before us gave in to the pressures of the day? What we do not only determines where we go but it determines where generations will go after us.

Sandy and I spent a very quiet Christmas together yesterday. In the aftermath of Christmas Eve, we took time to count our blessings, open a few presents from friends, and mostly thank God for the beautiful gift of life. Then Sandy started meddling. She said, "I know we support the church and contribute to the community and try to live faithful lives, but when I hear the cry of the children, I wonder if we could not be doing more? Could we live more simply than others may simply live?" She is right. What difference will we make for the hurt of the world? The actions we take make a difference. I guess we are going to have to do something about that.

The attitudes we hold make a difference. There is an instrument on a plane called an ATTITUDE INDICATOR. It measures the aircraft's position in relation to the horizon. When the nose of the plane is pointed up, it's called a nose-up attitude. When the nose of the plane is pointed down, it's a nose-down attitude. At the threshold of this New Year, is your attitude pointing up or down?

What if the day after Christmas became a day of new beginnings, a time to remember and move on? What if we grasped love's full potential and started walking the paths of peace? What if we were to wake up to the power of God in our midst?