

Matthew 2:13-23
January 1, 2023

The Biggest Story

“What is the biggest story of 2022?” That question was asked at a family dinner on one of my trips to St. Louis in the last couple of weeks. We came up with various answers. I checked the New York Times and there seems to be general agreement:

- 1 - The war in Ukraine
- 2 - The death of Queen Elizabeth
- 3 - Hurricane Ian
- 4 - The shooting in Uvalde, Texas

All of these were at or near the top of everyone’s list. They all involve loss and pain, that is apparent from the first glance. I have heard of bad news bias and complaints about the prevalence of bad news over good news in the media.

Any attempts to remedy the situation seem to fail because this list does not represent merely the news we are given, but the news we choose to consume . . . , that is, the list is generated by the number of hits on news webpages, these were the most *read* stories.

So not only does the news coverage tend towards bad news, but readers tend towards bad news as well. How could it be otherwise? In the end, I believe, the bad news phenomenon can’t be blamed on anyone in particular, it is proclaimed and read and viewed because it happens, and people are anxious about it.

Among the changes in the world over the last several hundred years, this dynamic isn’t among them, there is bad news in the world and people are addicted.

We begin each year with the exclamation, “Happy New Year,” and even though it is repeated millions of times so that it becomes almost reflexive like, “fine thanks, how are you?” It is also clear that it represents our most sincere and deeply held hopes. And it is, after all, a blessing, “may the new year find you well, and happy.” I am sure that at some level we all really mean it.

But we are also drawn to the darkness of things. It was no different for those who under the guidance of the spirit told the story of Israel, and gave us the gospel news about Jesus.

Immediately after the proclamation of Christ’s birth in Matthew’s gospel, comes the story of the Magi, clearly a part of the Christmas pageant that is endearing to us, but it has in it a *dark* element, and our reading this morning forces us to reckon with it.

It is the death of the male infants in Judea at the behest of King Herod. Sometimes when we tell the story, we skip over it, I mean we say it, but we don’t emphasize it because it is out of step with the spirit to the season.

The slaughter of the innocents is accompanied by a quotation from the Book of Jeremiah, which is one of the saddest and most heart-wrenching set of lines

ever written. It is repeated in Matthew with breathtaking starkness, a kind of blunt matter-of-factness. We speak sometimes of news so good words can't carry the freight. Here we are concerned with news so bad it perhaps should never be spoken, unfortunately the words carry the freight quite well.

There are some in the world who don't believe the slaughter of the innocents ever happened, nor a flight to Egypt, because they were elements added to the story after a thorough search of the Hebrew Bible in an attempt to convince people the gospel was a fulfillment of prophecy. I think this sentiment emerges from the unwillingness to admit that human beings are as capable of evil as this story implies they are.

But we know better; the news about the Texas school shooting and the invasion of Ukraine with its bombings of schools and hospitals and power plants tells us that neither Herod's order, nor the destruction of Israel at the hands of her conquerors are that far removed from the ordinary events of the day, even in our own times.

If one is going to tell a story, there is no credible way to tell it if the darkness is removed. There is more to this than the fulfilling of scripture . From the beginning the life of Jesus was precarious, but he was protected so that he could live his purpose. So on this day that we combine these enchanting words; *happy* . . . and *new* . . . and *year* be reminded that the Christian faith encourages us in several ways:

1 - To be hopeful about the future in spite of the contrary evidence, because people, with all their contradictions, distortions, and pathologies are *not* in charge . . . and by God's grace are capable of a better goodness than is ordinarily recognized and rarely makes the news.

2 - God cares for us and provides the resources so that we can live according to God's purposes, and when the worst happens we are protected from ultimate harm.

3 - In telling the bad news, the bible charges us to be realistic about our life experience, to pay attention to the hard times as well as the good, because it is often a redeeming of something negative that is the essence of good news, like when the cross became the means of forgiveness for sin.

There is significance in the telling of Jesus' story:

1 - that he was a victim of the abuse of power and not the perpetrator of it.

2 - that he was a refugee and not the one who took actions to create refugees.

3 - that his very life on earth was affected by the wars and conflicts of a difficult past that continued to linger into what was for him was a very cruel present, but that his teaching and his death is redemptive, not only for his own generation but for every generation since.

The gospel encourages that we can be set free to a life of gratitude and service by the goodness of this good news;

the experience of healing, of kindness, laughter, love and friendship, birth, graduation, marriage, maturity; of success, the sometimes redemption of the bad news into something good; . . . like the life of Jesus that stands to us as a light shining in the darkness.

What is going to be the biggest story of 2023? It is not the darkness, but rather the goodness all around that is the essence, the substance of God's grace, and the persistence of the faithful in their Christmas hope, singing this new year into being with praises and thanksgiving; that rings out into the silence a news to good not to be true, and in their blessing, which shines a great light and illumines our days.

In this light and because of this grace, we can genuinely desire for each other and for our world a happy, and blessed, and new . . . year . . . Nothing that the world and its life can throw at it can destroy it, can take away this, our joy and our blessed hope.

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